

The Life We Deserve by FangirlingStrangerThings

Series: The Life You Deserve Universe [6]

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Adventure, Danger, F/M, FangirlingStrangerThings, Fluff, Humour, Mileven, Mileven's children, Original Characters - Freeform, Romance, Stranger Things (TV 2016) References, TLYD Universe, The Life You Deserve Universe, The Next Generation, Wheeler children

Language: English

Characters: Ben Wheeler, Chloe Harrington, Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Emily Byers, Grace Byers, Holly Wheeler, Ivy Wheeler - Character, James Wheeler, Jen Byers, Jessica Byers, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Karen Wheeler, Laura Henderson, Lily Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Max Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Original Characters, Robin Buckley, Ryan Sinclair, Sam Henderson, Steve Harrington, Ted Wheeler, Tyler Harrington, Will Byers, Zach Sinclair

Relationships: Dustin Henderson/Original Female Character(s), Eleven | Jane Hopper/Mike Wheeler, Ivy Wheeler and Ryan Sinclair, Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper, Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair, Robin Buckley & Steve Harrington, Will Byers/Jennifer Hayes

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2020-04-21

Updated: 2021-06-06

Packaged: 2022-03-31 15:01:54

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 7

Words: 90,563

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

It's the year 2013, almost 30 years since Mike and El first met. We rejoin the party and the next generation as their summer leads to romance, adventure, mystery and danger.

Sequel to The Life You Deserve, following the lives of Mileven and their three children, Ivy, James and Ben. With all our favourite characters thrown in and a bundle of new original characters added

to the mix. It will be a summer they never forget!

Currently Rated Teen.

1. Let the Summer Begin

Author's Note:

- For [OTTSTF](#).

AN: Hi everyone, I'm back! How are you all doing during this crazy time? I hope everyone is safe, doing as best as they can and washing their hands?!

As I'm sure for a lot of people, these past weeks haven't just been about COVID-19. I had to have surgery three weeks ago amid the mayhem and I am at home recovering. I will be back to the hospital that I work at in two weeks, so now that I am feeling better I wanted to make the most of my time and have a bit of fun with some writing.

In between writing original stories, I have been coming back to *The Life We Deserve* for months. But with the country, well the world being on lockdown, I have really had some time to focus on this story and finally get this first chapter completed. As well as finally mapping out the rest of the story and the chapters.

First of all, thank you to everyone reading this, because that means you are giving this story a chance after all of this time! Second of all, I hope everyone knows before starting, that *The Life We Deserve*, which is the sequel to *The Life You Deserve* is very different and original in its own right.

It is the next generation, with new characters that I have created. It has all of our canon ST characters and instead of being a series of one-shots, it is a story of one summer in 2013 and will be filled with love, humour, adventure and danger! If it is a story that still intrigues you then I suggest you read on :-)

This story is gifted to my amazing partner Tom aka OTTSTF, who has been on TLYD journey from the start. He was one of my lovely reviewers and readers, than became one of my closest friends and then became the love of my life <3 I really couldn't have asked for a more magical way to find my partner. I hope you enjoy this babe and let's keep building the life we deserve ;-)

So, without any further ranting, please enjoy Chapter 1!

The Life We Deserve

Chapter 1 – Let the Summer Begin

June 2013

Mike wasn't sure what it was that woke him up as his heavy eyes took a cautious peek into the now bright bedroom. The warm beam of the summer sun cast heat and light into the cosy pale blue room.

The cream drapes fluttered ever so slightly from the breeze of the cracked open window, and the smell of summer; the grass and the sweetness of honeysuckle seeped slowly into the bedroom on the gentle breeze.

Mike sighed a heavy breath as he blinked rapidly to try and decrease the sleepiness still within his gaze. He could tell it wasn't the alarm clock that had woken him, considering his heart didn't feel like it was permanently lodged in his throat and he hadn't woken up feeling startled.

Mike let out a yawn as he turned over, his dark hair ruffled and messy against the pillow as he tucked up to the beautiful woman

sleeping beside him. His eyes swept over her face and he felt a smile curve his lips as he looked at his wife.

El was as beautiful today as she had been the first moment he saw her. Almost 30 years together, marriage, careers, three kids and a dog later. Except for the addition of a few lines here or a grey hair there, they were very much the same people. Strong, brave and madly in love.

"You're staring at me again," came the muffled, sleepy voice of El Wheeler.

Mike grinned, biting into his lower lip to contain his laughter. His eyes felt bright as he responded, "when am I *not* staring at you?"

"That's a good point," El mumbled, yawning as she smiled. She exhaled a sigh and opened her tired eyes, looking straight at her husband. Her beautiful hazel eyes sparkled with the light of the room and she grinned.

"Good morning beautiful," Mike whispered, snuggling closer to El and nuzzling his nose against her own.

She stretched out her left arm, draping it around Mike's naked upper body, pressing her palm against the warm skin of his back. "Good morning handsome," El whispered in response, her voice light and airy with happiness as she pulled Mike closer, their noses bumping slightly as their lips met in a gentle kiss.

Their kisses were lingering, Mike's lips pressing a little firmer, their mouths opening and their breath mingling as they pulled closer. Mike could feel the swirling warmth of desire tingling down his body and he ran a hand through El's messy hair, his fingers getting lost in her curls as he pulled her face closer, wanting no distance between them. They were lost in the moment, lost in their love and never wanting to be found -

Beep! Beep! Beep!

Mike and El jolted, banging their foreheads together and groaning in disappointment. Mike reached for his phone, rubbing his forehead in

the process as he cursed his alarm clock. He fumbled for his phone, swiping the beeping alarm silent.

Mike chucked his phone back on the bedside table and sighed, collapsing back onto the pillow next to El who was staring up at the ceiling.

She closed her eyes for a moment and took a deep breath, calming her body down. "After today, we won't have to hear that for two weeks."

Mike snorted, nodding his head in agreement. "And we don't have to yell for the kids to get up for at least two months."

El laughed, rolling her eyes in amusement as she turned on her side to look at Mike. He leaned his head against the pillow to stare back at her, a smile playing on his lips.

"I'm sure we will still have to wake them up. They can't stay asleep until noon."

"Ha!" Mike laughed, nudging his cheek into the pillow to get more comfortable as he wrapped his arm around El's slim frame. "You just watch James."

El frowned, "yeah...he has been on that box thingy a lot."

"Xbox babe."

"Yeah that thing."

"You know he wants an Xbox One for Christmas right? I've told him he's got to be an *angel* for the rest of the year if he thinks he's even in with a *chance* of getting one."

El smirked, "oh *please*. You want him to have one because you want to play on it when he's at track practice."

Mike gasped making El laugh, "you've found out my secret!" he teased, tickling her side for a moment, making her squirm and giggle like they were teenagers again.

El grinned, her eyes bright. She loved when Mike got playful. She gave him a stern look which didn't match up with the smile on her face. "I know *all* of your secrets."

Mike sighed dramatically, "I thought you promised not to read my thoughts anymore."

El smiled, reaching up for her husband, her hand resting on his cheek as she stroked his stubble, her eyes flicking over the few small grey hairs that had started to colour his usually dark facial hair. While she wished she could slow it down, there really was no greater gift than aging with the people you love the most. Sharing memories and growing together was truly a blessing.

"I don't have to read your thoughts to know all your secrets," El smiled, looking into Mike's dark eyes. They had always reminded her of a starry night sky. They were beautiful, *deep* and held magic. "I just know *you*."

The warmth spread into Mike's chest, his heart full as he reached for El, kissing her lovingly, every movement of his lips full of purpose and passion for his beautiful wife. There was no greater feeling in the world than being close to her, he could search the universe high and low, and still know that his one true home was by El's side.

There was a tickling sensation on his foot and he grinned against El's lips, mildly surprised that with her powers she could be kissing him with such passion and yet also teasing his toes. He wiggled them, feeling something wet and coarse brush against his heel which distracted him enough to pull away from a confused El.

Mike looked down at his foot which was lying out of the bed and huffed an exasperated sigh of annoyance as he realised who the real culprit was.

Having gotten out of bed to wake up her parents was Eggo, their six-year-old Labrador who happily sat in front of Mike's foot licking it. She caught her dad's eyes and jumped up, pacing slightly to indicate she wanted to go outside.

"Looks like someone needs the bathroom," El chuckled, pulling back

the covers and getting out of bed.

"Yeah," Mike sighed in defeat as he also threw back the duvet and got out of bed, unable to prevent himself from scratching behind Eggo's ear when she came bounding over to meet him.

El grabbed her dressing gown and headed to the ensuite, stopping by the door to look back at her husband with a slight smirk. "Maybe if you hurry, you can join me in the shower."

In the time Mike looked up to the ensuite, the door was closing. He blushed slightly, unable to stop the racing in his heart as he looked from the now closed bathroom to Eggo who had gone back to pacing.

Mike grabbed his own dressing gown, never again would he be caught half naked in the hallway by one of his kids, and ushered Eggo out of the bedroom. "I need you to pee like you've never peed before," he muttered to her as she raced down the stairs, Mike hurrying after her. At the sound of the distant water faucet turning and the spray of a shower head, he quickly added. "And if you need a number two, you and I are going to have issues!"

The bacon sizzled in the pan, the smell drawing Mike in as he checked on the rashers while attempting to neaten his tie. He turned his attention to the scrambled egg, mixing it quickly and hoping that it wouldn't stick to the pan because it would be a *nightmare* to clean.

Ah the trivial worries of adulthood, Mike thought to himself as he smirked, jumping back slightly from the bacon which spat oil as it deepened in colour.

Eggo lurked nearby, far enough not to be caught by any spraying oil but close enough to snatch any droppings of food if the opportunity presented itself.

"You would think we never feed you," Mike mumbled to his fur child, his eyes glancing between her and the full bowl of dog food. He was positive she shrugged at him in response.

There were light footsteps on the stairs and Mike looked over his

shoulder to see El come into view. She was in her scrubs now, ready for work except for her shoes.

"Any luck?" Mike asked his wife, watching her expression as she walked over to help with breakfast.

"Ivy's getting ready, Ben has been tempted by breakfast and James just grumbled."

Mike laughed, shaking his head as he let El take the spatula out of his hands. "You would think they weren't excited about summer starting."

"Oh they will be," El mused with a smile on her face as she turned the bacon. "But they still have a full day of school ahead of them. You remember what that's like! It feels like a lifetime."

"True," Mike sighed as he headed for the freezer, pulling out a box of Eggo. He looked down at the cardboard frowning slightly. "But don't you miss it?"

"Miss what?" El called, not taking her attention off the frying pans. The smell in the air made Mike's stomach rumble and his taste buds come to life.

In response he shrugged self-consciously as he loaded the toaster with Eggo. "School," he finally answered. "Being *young*."

"Oh but honey *I'm* still young," El teased, pointing the spatula at Mike whose smile didn't hide the melancholy that was so evident in his face.

El softened as she watched her husband, her hazel eyes flickering over his handsome face. She exhaled a gentle breath, put down the spatula and turned off the stove before walking over to Mike and wrapping her arms around his torso.

El propped her chin on Mike's chest and looked up at him with a smile that curved with the immediate happiness she felt being so close to him. It never failed to give her a feeling of fullness. He made her whole, he truly was her everything, his soul deeply intertwined with her own. There was *nothing* that could break their bond.

Mike wrapped his arms around El, his hold firm but loving, wanting her as close as possible. He bent his head down and nudged her nose sweetly with his own.

"Hi," he breathed out, his anxiety slowly drifting away.

"Hi," El replied, her voice sweet and her eyes twinkling as she looked up at the man she loved. "Of course I miss being young," she finally admitted, answering Mike's earlier question. "But I *love* the life we have now. I have everything I could have ever dreamt of. More than I ever thought I would have in my life."

Mike couldn't help but feel choked as he looked deep into El's eyes, his chest tight with deep rooted emotion. The same love that had struck him almost thirty years ago was still there, and it only grew and matured every single day.

"And do you know what my favourite thing is?" El said quietly, her eyes capturing Mike.

"What?" he whispered, the moment feeling intimate.

"That I get the gift of growing old with *you*. That I get to see our children grow and learn every day. It's a *gift* Mike."

"Do you know how wise you are?" Mike asked as he moved one hand to El's hair, his fingers brushing through the strands. His dark eyes gazed over her face and he smiled, his chest filling with warmth.

El laughed, "not really. But I'm sure you can tell me a few more times..."

Mike grinned, kissing El's forehead, "you're wise," his lips moved to her cheek, "you're smart", their noses bumped as he moved to her other cheek, "you're beautiful" and finally he reached her lips, "and you mean everything to me."

Their lips collided, El's arms going around Mike's neck as she pulled him down closer. They were like magnets and nothing could pull them apart. It was them against the whole wide world. Nothing, absolutely noth -

"EW! Gross!"

Mike and El equally sighed in defeat against each other's lips, slowly pulling apart to look at their horrified youngest son.

Ben was standing by the stairs, his face disgusted as he looked between his parents and shuddered. Eggo happily bounded over to him and he hesitantly looked away from his mom and dad to stroke the Labrador.

El gave Mike an affectionate tap on the cheek and moved back to the stove. "Are you excited for your last day of school, baby?" she asked her youngest son as Mike started to take plates out of the cupboard.

"Yeah," Ben smiled, climbing onto one of the stools against the central island in the kitchen. "Seth and Logan wanna play D&D *all* summer, so I've got loads of campaigns to create!" He said enthusiastically.

Mike couldn't help but smile proudly as he laid down a plate of steaming bacon, scrambled eggs and Eggos. "Well if you need any help with campaign ideas you know who to come to."

"Uncle Will?" Ben said with a slight smirk.

"No!"

Ben laughed, reaching for the syrup and pouring it over his eggs before Mike snatched the syrup for his own meal, sitting next to his son.

El shook her head in amusement watching her boys for a moment before walking over to the stairs and propping her hand on the banister. "Ivy!" she shouted. "James! Breakfast is ready!"

"Coming!" Ivy called back.

El waited for a response from her oldest son, taping her fingers on the banister, when nothing happened she called him again. "James! Breakfast!" She sighed and looked back at Mike who shrugged, his mouth full of bacon and waffle.

El exhaled a sharp breath and ascended the stairs ready for battle, Eggo hurrying to join her. Ivy was just coming out of her room as her mom reached the top of the steps.

"You look lovely sweetie," El smiled at her beautiful daughter who looked down shyly at her denim skirt and sweater.

"Thanks mom," Ivy hesitantly smiled, moving her school bag to her shoulder, her other hand clasped around her smartphone. She watched her mom move towards James's room and sniggered, "good luck with the teenage boy smell!"

El laughed, "thank you honey. Breakfast is on the table."

"Thanks mom!" Ivy hurried past her mother, this time Eggo following the teenager, clearly the prospect of stealing some breakfast was more appealing than getting James up.

El watched her daughter go, a smile on her lips as her mini me disappeared from sight. Ivy was a perfect mix of her mom and dad, she looked so much like El and yet had Mike's dark hair and amber eyes. She was smart and ambitious, kind and gentle and more powerful than she knew. Unlike James, Ivy rarely used her powers. She was introverted, worried about hurting other people or being exposed. Perhaps it was because she understood it more at 17 than James did at 13, but El knew she didn't have to worry about Ivy's powers. She wanted a normal life and lived that way.

El turned her attention back to James, steadyng her shoulders as she turned the handle and slowly opened the bedroom door, peering through the gap to see where James was. She respected his privacy, especially now he was a teenager, so once she could see he was in fact still in bed, El rolled her eyes and pushed the door open the rest of the way.

She only cringed slightly at the smell of his room, it was stale and messy. Clothes on the floor, empty potato chips packets on his desk, his Xbox controller lying on top of the clean laundry El had put on top of his dresser three days ago.

"James," she cooed, knowing it would annoy her son who was going

through a lot of mood swings recently, and hated being hugged or any physical acts of affection.

James merely responded with a grumble, pulling his pillow over his sleepy head. This made El laugh as she walked closer and placed her hand on her son's skinny shoulder. "Come on now honey, it's the last day of school! And breakfast is on the table."

James yawned but didn't move. El smirked leaning down closer to her son, "wake up sleepy head! Do you want mommy to give you a kiss, a little kiss on the cheek?"

"Mom that's gross," James mumbled in a cracked voice, either from tiredness or puberty, El was unsure.

She stood back and sighed, knowing how she would get through to him. She narrowed her eyes and the pillow he had placed over his face levitated out of his grip while simultaneously the drapes opened wide, allowing sunshine into the blue painted bedroom.

"Mom!" James whined trying to cover his eyes from the light.

"James!" El responded melodramatically. She walked to the bedroom door and looked back at her son, "now don't make me levitate you out of bed again."

"Okay, okay," James yawned, rubbing at his eyes and shuffling to the edge of his bed to get up.

"That's more like it," El smiled fondly, unable to be mad at her lazy teenager. "Breakfast is ready sweetheart."

"Thanks mom," James croaked, giving his mother a thumbs up before reaching out for his clothes which travelled across the room and into his waiting hands as El left the room to give her son privacy.

Mike watched as Ivy gave Ben a look of distaste as he poured more syrup onto his remaining eggs. "You do realise that's disgusting right?"

"You realise *you're* disgusting right?" Ben responded without looking

up from his breakfast while Mike tried to stop the up and coming fight between his children.

"Ben, Ivy is *not* disgusting. She's a beautiful young lady."

Ben sniggered, and Ivy looked creeped out that her dad would say such a thing as she went back to texting, her thumbs moving quickly on her touch screen phone. Mike sighed before adding "and putting syrup on eggs isn't disgusting either."

Ivy smirked, her eyes not leaving her phone. "I beg to differ."

"Yeah I'm with Ivy on this one," El said re-entering the kitchen and sitting next to their daughter. Mike had done her a plate of Eggos as requested and she smiled at him thankfully.

"Any updates on James?" Mike asked cutting his bacon. "Has he learnt how to say more than 'eurgh' in response to a question?"

Ivy and Ben laughed and El smirked, trying to contain her laughter. "Don't be mean," she cautioned her husband, giving him a playful glare. "You were exactly the same to your mom at that age."

Mike grinned, "I doubt it, when I was 13 I was..." his smile faded off as memories flashed before his eyes. Sitting in the blanket fort, night after night, tears in his eyes, desperation in his voice as he called out to El, again and again.

He felt the gentle touch of El's warm hand on his own bringing him back into the present and he slowly looked up at her. Her beautiful eyes were filled with tender love, safety, *home*. El was *here*, she was happy and healthy, and it was everything Mike had ever wanted. Relief filled the old wound that lay deep in his heart.

"What's happening here?" Ivy asked, breaking the moment, looking between her parents in confusion, Ben doing the same as he chewed his bacon, his eyes flicking between Mike and El.

"We were just having a moment," El smiled, giving Mike's hand an affectionate squeeze before going back to her breakfast.

"You have a lot of moments," Ivy mumbled under her breath as she

went back to scrolling her Instagram page and ate one handed.

Ben giggled, "Ivy they were kissing when I came into the kitchen."

"I don't doubt it," Ivy shuddered not looking up from her phone.

There was a creek on the stairs and Mike and El looked up as James entered the kitchen, yawning but thankfully dressed and semi presentable.

"Good morning!" Mike said to his son who gave him a small wave in acknowledgement as he jumped up onto the stool and pulled his plate towards him.

"Isn't it lovely being acknowledged by your child," Mike goaded sarcastically to El who laughed.

"I did acknowledge you!" James said through a mouth full of egg.
"I waved."

"And I am honoured," Mike gasped, hand to his chest while Ben, Ivy and El laughed. James shrugged going back to his breakfast, shuffling the bacon and egg into his mouth like there was no tomorrow.

Ivy looked away from her phone long enough to shake her head at James. "Do you not know how to chew? You're *inhaling* your food."

"And you're gonna inhale your phone."

"That doesn't even make sense."

"I don't care, you're gonna – "

"Stop it you two," El warned getting up and putting her plate in the dishwasher. "Or neither of you are coming to the party tonight."

"The party's in our house mom," James said looking up in confusion, watching El close the dishwasher and turn back to her children.

"I don't care, if you can't act like sensible human beings, then you can spend the party in your rooms."

James pouted, "but I wanted to see Zach! Me and Sam were going to let him play Xbox with us."

"Yeah and I've got to see Ryan!" Ivy piped up, panic setting into her voice.

"Yeah you do," James teased quietly making Ben laugh and for Ivy to shove him with her powers.

"Hey!" Mike called, his voice authoritative for once. "Stop this right now, or your mom's right. You won't be coming to the party, and we'll be telling Ryan, Zach and Sam that you're grounded."

Ivy sighed in defeat, "fine," she mumbled picking at her breakfast and finally putting down her phone.

James didn't say anything but went back to his breakfast, his silence acting as his response that he would behave. And for a good ten minutes they managed to have breakfast in relative peace.

"Right I better get to work," El spoke up, pulling on her jacket and walking up to the island where all the kids were still sat. Mike was loading the dishwasher with sauce pans, but he watched on as El went up to Ben, kissing him on the cheek which he still allowed.

"I hope you all have a great last day," El said as she moved onto Ivy kissing her on the cheek. "Have fun and don't do anything stupid," she added ruffling James's hair, making him startle which allowed her time to kiss his cheek as well which he grumbled over but didn't protest too badly. Mike knew James was still a secret mommy's boy and he smirked to himself over this knowledge.

"I love you guys," El smiled, looking at her children. No matter what age they were, they would always be her babies. There was nothing she wouldn't do for them, and she would never stop being their mommy.

"Love you mom," Ivy responded first, smiling at El before going back to her breakfast.

"Love you mom," James and Ben added, their tone almost identical. Both slightly embarrassed at proclaiming their love for their mother.

But El was more than happy with the sentiment and happily moved onto Mike who had his arms open ready for his wife.

"Have a great day babe, I love you." Mike told El as he leaned down and pressed a soft kiss to her lips. Nothing risqué of course, but it still didn't stop their children from making gagging noises and averting their eyes.

El sighed contently and pressed another kiss to Mike's lips, her heart happy and full. "I love you too sweetheart, have a great last day at work."

"Thank you honey, you too." Mike responded, pulling his wife into his arms. El smiled happily, cuddling into her husband's chest and feeling calm in the moment. Everything else seemed to fade for a moment, the kids moaning, Eggo sniffing the floor for scraps and the sound of the television on the wall. For a moment it was just her and Mike, she could feel his heart beating against his shirt, a strong pounding, beating for her, beating for their children and for the life they had built together.

Things were good, at least in that moment. But time did move and El had to get to work, so she sighed pulling back from her husband and wished her family a good day once more, before giving Eggo a cuddle and leaving the house.

Mike watched her go, leaning by the kitchen window and waving to his wife as she backed her car out of the drive. He stayed by the window until she was out of sight and then turned around to face the kids. They weren't paying attention to him of course, so when he clapped his hands together, he finally grabbed their focus.

"Right team let's get ready to leave."

Mike turned the air con up, cold air blasting through the vents of the Volvo SUV as he drove down the long stretch of roads surrounding Hawkins. He looked in the rear-view mirror to check on Eggo was sitting in the trunk, her head propped on the head rest next to James.

The loud music distracted Mike and he lowered his brow in distaste.

It was like they were having a party in the car, but the music was just *noise*, nothing substantial about it.

"Work hard, play hard, work hard, play hard, we work hard, play hard, keep partying like it's your job!" Ivy sang from the back seat. James sat next to her, nodding his head to the music as he played games on his phone.

"How is this even music?!" Mike shouted to Ben over the loud beat, his youngest son was sat in the passenger seat next to his dad. He looked up at Mike and smiled, shrugging his thin shoulders.

"Come on baby and drop it, scrub that floor and just mop it!" Ivy sang, doing a mini dance in the back seat.

"Mop it?" Mike asked as Ivy continued to rap.

"Show these gangsters how you pop lock it, don't care what you got in your pocket. I peep the way that you rocking, flip that thang thang don't stop it!"

"Please stop it."

James laughed and joined in with Ivy, "Wanna just bang bang and pop it – "

"That makes no sense!"

"While the club crowded just watch you, work it out!"

Mike had enough and turned the music down to James and Ivy's protest. "I'm sorry but that is *not* real music! You know the eighties was the epitome of music, right?"

"He's got a good point there," James commented going back to his game.

"Yeah eighties music is good, but modern music is good too!" Ivy said exasperated.

Mike scoffed, "the eighties had Michael Jackson, Madonna, Bryan Adams, Bon Jovi, Queen!"

"We have *Beyoncé*!"

"Who?"

"*Dad!*" Ivy shouted in a pained voice as she hid her face in her hands, screaming internally.

Mike laughed, "relax, I know who Beyoncé is. But seriously, eighties music was the best. Ben put on my playlist please."

Ben grabbed Mike's phone and navigated to his music. "Which one?" he asked his dad as he scrolled through the long list.

Mike smiled, keeping his eyes on the road. "Any, just shuffle. That's the beauty of the eighties. They were all great!"

'I got my first real six-string bought it at the five-and-dime. Played it 'til my fingers bled, was the summer of '69.'

"Oh come on!" Ivy moaned, pointing at the radio. "*Summer of '69* is a classic! That's not fair."

Mike laughed while the boys started singing to the masterpiece of a song. "Every eighties song is a classic! Embrace it honey."

Ivy rolled her eyes and looked out the window, crossing her arms but unable to stop the smile that was curving her lips. Before she could help herself, she was miming the words and then joining in with her brothers and dad. All of them belting out the lyrics while Eggo barked along.

"Standing on your mama's porch! You told me that you'd wait forever! Oh, and when you held my hand, I knew that it was now or never! Those were the best days of my life! Oh, yeah!"

They were onto *Africa* by the time that Mike slowly drove down the gravel drive to the Hopper residence. The old Byers house had been extended over the years, had a new paint job and an extended decking. But it was still familiar, still a second home to Mike along with his own childhood home.

Eggo started to pant, grumbling in impatience as they got closer to

the house. For as long as Mike could remember it had been routine that he dropped Eggo off with Hopper on the way to do the school run. Having Eggo and the Henderson's dog Dart, who was Eggo's litter sibling kept the retired Chief of Police young. Well according to Joyce anyway.

"Ah, looks like Sam is already here," Mike commented as he pulled up to the house, slowing the car to a stop.

James looked up and waved to Sam who stood up from the porch where he had been stroking his black Labrador Dart, whose tail was waving madly. James and Sam were both in their final year of middle school and great friends, more like brothers. Mike saw so much of Dustin in Sam, but he was blonde like Laura and seemed to have more of her common sense than his dear old dad.

Mike opened the driver's side door and smiled at Sam, "morning bud, your dad already gone to work?"

Sam stood up from the porch, Dart running madly over to Mike for a quick stroke before waiting impatiently for Eggo to be let out of the trunk. Ivy got out of the car to help their golden Labrador who was starting to whine.

"No, he's just inside," Sam answered Mike's question. "Joyce offered him cookies and you know what he's like."

"Geez this early?" Mike laughed closing the driver's door.

"Mom has him on a diet."

"Ah, that explains it then," Mike grinned, shaking his head in amusement just as the porch door opened, Dustin walking out first, a cookie in his hands.

"Hey guys!" He called, waving at Ben and James in particular who were still sat in the car.

"Hey Uncle Dustin!" they both called back.

Ivy came around the car with Eggo who sprinted towards her brother, Dart jumping at her as they reunited.

"You would think they didn't see each other like every day," Mike mused, watching the dogs.

"They're not stupid, they know it's the last day of summer and they aren't going to be seeing grandpa Hopper every day."

"Enough of that," came the grumble of the retired Chief himself as he exited the house, pretending not to love it when both Labradors bounded over to him excitedly. He absentmindedly scratched behind their ears and looked over at his grandchildren.

"Hey kids," he waved, his stern exterior softening, as it always did at the sight of Ivy, James and Ben.

"Hey grandpa!" Ben waved from the passenger seat before going back to playing on Mike's phone.

"Sup grandpa," James called, moving up for Sam who had just gotten into the car next to him.

"Sup?" Hopper mumbled, turning to look at Mike. "What the hell?"

"Don't look at me!" Mike replied, his hands up in defence while Dustin laughed.

"Hi grandpa," Ivy said, coming over to Hopper to give him a hug. He smiled and squeezed her close.

"Stop growing up you," he said affectionately. "You're only meant to be like seven."

Ivy laughed, rolling her eyes in exasperation as she pulled back. "I'm seventeen grandpa," she said fondly, never mad at Hopper. He was her hero.

"Don't remind me," Mike sighed watching his daughter head back to the car. He exhaled a heavy breath looking back at Dustin and Hopper.

"Am I going to have trouble with her?"

"Considering how you and El were, I'm surprised Ivy has been so

good so far!" Dustin teased, causing Mike to punch him in the shoulder, his cheeks reddening, especially under Hopper's glare.

"And what does Henderson mean by *that* Wheeler?"

"He means *nothing*," Mike said, looking at Dustin and giving him a warning glare.

Dustin sniggered, "yeah...I meant absolutely *nothing*. Anyway! I best get to work, and you need to get my son to school before he's late on his last day of middle school!"

"No, no, no! Wait!" Joyce called in a panic, hurrying onto the porch holding an old digital camera. She sighed, shaking her head. "It took me ages to find this damn camera."

"You know you can use the camera on the phone Jonathan bought you right?" Dustin offered kindly, a slight look of sympathy on his face.

Joyce waved him away, "oh I can't use that thing." She started towards the car, looking down at the camera and mumbling to herself about settings.

Mike, Dustin and Hopper watched her as she kissed all the kids and took photos of them in the car.

"Correction, Joyce is going to make Sam late on his last day." Dustin laughed, watching the crazed grandma proudly taking photos of the kids.

"Okay, okay," Hopper mumbled, before clearing his voice and shouting "Joyce! Joyce, they need to get to school."

"Oh okay," his wife replied with a small laugh, her face filled with emotion as she stepped back and let Mike get in the car, not before giving him a kiss on the cheek. "Have a great day you, guys!"

"Thank you," Ivy, James, Ben and Sam responded.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do dude," Dustin said to Sam, fist pumping him through the open window as Mike started to reverse

the car.

"Well that doesn't give him many options," James joked, making Sam and Dustin laugh.

Don't Stop Believin' began to play in the car and Dustin clapped walking alongside the vehicle as Mike reversed, "yes! Now that's real music!"

"That's what I've been telling them!" Mike responded, while Ivy couldn't help but mention how she had only heard this song from *Glee*.

Mike scoffed but Dustin smiled as he proclaimed "I love Glee!". James and Sam looked embarrassed, but Ivy leaned over and high waved her uncle.

"Okay, okay," Mike laughed, stopping the car enough to look at Dustin. "I've really got to go now."

"Have a great day everyone!" Dustin responded getting the message as he stepped back and let Mike turn the car and head back up the road. Eggo and Dart obediently stayed by Hopper and when he went to sit on the porch swing they both jumped up to lick him. The calm was interrupted by a blinding flash as Joyce captured the moment.

"Hey!" the Chief moaned, rubbing at his eyes.

Joyce laughed as she joined her husband and the dogs on the swing, Dustin waving to them as he got into his car and headed to the hospital where he and Laura both worked. They watched Dustin leave and turned to look at one another.

"When did they all grow up?" Hopper sighed, his frown adding creases to his already lined face.

Joyce merely smiled, a choked expression on her face as she lay her cheek on Hopper's shoulder, letting him put his arm around her. "Sometime around Demogorgons and puberty I would guess."

Hopper sniffed out a laugh and pressed a kiss to the crown of Joyce's grey hair. "Yeah, I guess so."

"So, if you were an Avenger, which one would you be?" Sam asked James, the boys both playing games on their smart phones, their thumbs quickly tapping on the screens, while Mike finally got closer to the Hawkins Middle School and High School.

"Probably Tony Stark, because one, he's *awesome* and two, because he's the strongest."

Ivy snorted and looked at James, locking her phone and putting it back in her school bag. "Well I've had my powers the longest and I'm the oldest, so clearly *I* would be the strongest Avenger."

"So, you'd be Thor then," Sam joked.

"More like The Hulk," James added with a snigger making Sam laugh loudly. "Especially when she's on her per – "

"*Boys!*" Mike warned while Ivy narrowed her eyes at James, his phone suddenly flying out of his hands making him lose his game.

"Hey!" James shouted, narrowing his own eyes at Ivy's bag, making it unzip and for her own phone to fly out. Ivy glared, the phone stuck floating in mid-air between them both as they equally tried to control it.

Mike pulled the car over to the side of the road and turned in his chair to look at his teenagers. "Enough!" He nervously looked around to see that no other cars had passed.

"How many times have your mom and I told you two the importance of being discreet? We've *told* you everything your mom has been through! Do you really want that to be *you*?"

Ivy looked ashamed and James ruffled his hair uncomfortably. The phone drifted slowly back down to the seat and Ivy grabbed it, stuffing it back into her bag.

"Sorry dad," James muttered, his cheeks slightly pink at getting in trouble in front of his friend. Sam looked awkward too, pretending to gaze intently out of the passenger window.

"Sorry dad," Ivy agreed, her eyes genuinely filled with regret. "I don't even *use* my powers. You know that."

"I know Ivy, but you both can't be losing control like that. I *know* it's easy to argue with your sibling, hell you should have seen me and Aunt Nancy growing up! But come on you two, you've got to be smarter than that. You've got these gifts and yes, they can be beautiful, but you *have* to be more responsible with them. *Okay?*"

"Yeah okay," James nodded, actually listening to his dad for once. Clearing his throat and picking his phone off the car floor. "Sorry dad."

"We'll be more responsible," Ivy added in, smiling slightly at Mike. "*Promise.*"

Mike's frustration wavered, and his lips easily spread into a relieved smile. "Good," he said, sighing as he turned back to the front, and checked his mirrors as he drove the final miles to the school parking lot.

"Have a great day guys," Mike said to James, Sam and Ivy as they all clambered out of the car, the middle school and high school being right next door to one another. James and Sam were already gone, having joined their friends Chris and Josh.

"Will do!" Ivy shouted, as she hurried over to her best friend Lisa, who stood against her own car waiting to be joined. The girls hugged in excitement, already talking avidly as they linked arms and head towards the high school for their last day as juniors. Mike smiled, his eyes softening as he watched them go. He remembered Ivy's first day of kindergarten and swallowed the lump in his throat, unable to believe how fast time had gone.

Mike turned back to Ben who was being quiet, his eyes glazed over.

"You okay bud?" he asked his son, ruffling his honey locks.

Ben nodded but didn't look at his dad. Mike cleared his throat and decided to get out of the parking lot, driving carefully past the flurry of students before crossing the road and heading into the parking lot

for the kindergarten. He couldn't believe that Ben would be going into middle school. Out of all of their children, he was the most calm and easy going. But perhaps it was because those damn hormones just hadn't started yet.

Mike pulled up, turned off the car and turned to his youngest son. "What's up?"

Ben bit his lip and looked up at his dad, his complex emotions spilling out into words. "Ivy and James go on and on about their powers and I don't have *any*. I'm not an Avenger..."

"Oh Ben," Mike sighed, undoing his seat belt so he could turn properly to his son who was looking down at his hands ashamed. "First of all, you know Ivy and James aren't real Avengers, right? They don't go around saving lives or the world for that matter. Well, unless the world was their smart phones."

Ben smiled slightly, but Mike could tell he was still down. The topic of Ben not having powers had not come up that often. El and Mike had just assumed he hadn't inherited the gene like Ivy and James had, that he was more like Mike in that regard. It was *never* something that had bothered them, in fact it was almost a relief that they didn't have to worry about Ben as much as they did Ivy and James. But in that moment Mike realised they had been wrong to assume that.

Mike reached out for his son, his large palm running through his son's soft hair. "Ben if you have powers or not, it doesn't make you any less *special*. You are loved and gifted. I mean that imagination of yours? Come *on*!" Mike smiled, Ben slowly looking up at his dad. "Your campaigns are *ten times* cooler than mine ever were. Like what you did with the secret passage in Cragmaw Castle?! I was *not* expecting that."

Ben laughed, his eyes brighter and his smile wider. "It was pretty cool," he admitted, gripping his school bag.

"It was *awesome!*" Mike grinned. He moved his hand to Ben's shoulder, giving it a comforting squeeze. "So please don't ever think you're not as gifted or special as Ivy and James because you *are!*"

"Thanks dad," Ben grinned, no longer slouched but looking energised and excited.

"You're welcome bud. Now have a great last day of kindergarten! I love you."

Ben pulled on his backpack and smiled at Mike, "love you dad," he said shyly, opening the car door and jumping out. "Bye," he waved awkwardly.

"Bye bud," Mike waved back, his lip quivering slightly as he watched Ben run over to Logan and Seth. He could tell they were already discussing D&D when Ben pulled out his campaign book as they walked over to the entrance, disappearing a moment later.

Mike sighed and leaned back in his seat, closing his eyes. His phone dinged, and he hesitantly opened his eyes, looking at the preview screen. Seeing it was a message from El, Mike picked up his phone and immediately started to reply.

El: How did they get on?! I wish I could have been there ☺

Mike: It's okay babe 🌟 They seemed excited, I've just dropped them off!

El: Good 😊 And how are you doing babe?

Mike: Not as good! 🌟

El: I didn't think so ☺ But it will be okay baby, they aren't leaving home just yet!

Mike: Yeah that's true I guess. Well I best get to work beautiful. See you later honey.

El: See you soon babe. I love you ❤️ XXX

Mike: I love you babe 🌟 XXX

The school hallway was bustling with energetic teenagers, seniors hugging each other, their school work completed. They would either be off to college, starting work or figuring out what they wanted to

do with their futures.

Freshmen were cheering that they were no longer the fresh meat, sophomores were worrying about the SATs and juniors were thinking of college applications.

Ivy leaned against her locker, laughing with her best friend Lisa as they signed each other's yearbooks.

"Oh my god Matt Edwards signed your yearbook!" Lisa exclaimed her blue eyes flickering over the messy writing.

"Yeah?" Ivy laughed in confusion. "Is that bad?"

Lisa opened her perfectly lip-glossed mouth in shock, "oh honey it's anything but *bad*. Matt is *fit*. Do we need to get you glasses?!"

Ivy grinned and shook her head, "I can see perfectly *fine* thank you!" She shrugged grabbing back her yearbook from Lisa and slipping it into her backpack. "I guess he's fit in a conventional way, but definitely *not* my type."

"Hmm" Lisa smirked as Ivy closed her locker and the girls headed to home room. "And what is your type exactly? An olive-skinned, hot skateboarder by any chance?"

Ivy immediately felt her cheeks heat and she was thankful she had worn foundation, praying that it would cover the majority of her blushing. "I don't think of Ryan that way..."

Lisa snorted, laughing as she shook her head in dismay. "Just the fact that you knew I was talking about *Ryan* should answer my question!"

"Stop!" Ivy moaned, unable to stop herself from laughing with Lisa as they made their way through the crowded hallway. "Okay *maybe* I had a crush on him years ago...but it's not like that now."

"Ivy you can lie to yourself, but you can't lie to me," Lisa said wisely, the girls pausing to wave at Ivy's twin cousins Lily and Grace Byers who were enjoying their last day of being sophomores before the reality of junior year hit them.

"What do you mean?" Ivy asked Lisa as they turned down the next hallway.

Her best friend gave her a pained expression of sympathy. "Every time Ryan and his family come to visit, you get all giddy and never get off your phone for one."

"Well me and him are making plans for when he's in Hawkins."

"Exactly. Plans together!"

Ivy laughed, "but he's my friend, *of course* we're making plans together."

"With other people?"

"Well no. Just me and him..." Ivy said uncomfortably, adjusting her school bag. She rolled her eyes at the knowing look on Lisa's face. "Hanging out with a friend just the two of us does *not* mean I'm in love with him! I mean look at you and me! I'm sorry but I'm going to need some more evidence."

Lisa laughed, her smile widening. "Okay, okay. How about the way you blush and smile when you get his text replies? Or how you never stop talking about him? Or how you've got a photo of the two of you in your locker?"

"Hey! We are like thirteen in that photo."

"And what *else* happened when you two were thirteen Miss Wheeler?!"

Ivy knew that no foundation in the world could hide the red rosiness of her cheeks. It felt like it was spreading too, her neck was too warm, and her skin felt clammy. "We kissed," she croaked.

She didn't think in a million lifetimes she would ever forget her first kiss with Ryan, her first kiss *ever*. They were in the movie theatre watching *Harry Potter and the Half Blood*, her dad who had insisted on chaperoning them had left the theatre for more snacks and it had just *happened*. They had both reached for the popcorn, their hands resting together, their cheeks flushed, their heart beating erratically

as their eyes met.

They had both leaned in, their noses squishing together as their lips touched. It had been rushed and clumsy, but *perfect*. Ivy had never felt anything like it since. Ryan went back to California the next day, and they didn't talk about their kiss again.

Ivy had assumed that they were a thing, rejecting any date offers she received from her classmates. But when they turned fifteen Ryan told her he was dating a girl named Sophia. Ivy was devastated, and Lisa insisted that they make up a boyfriend for Ivy to get back at Ryan and make him jealous. *Enrique* was Ivy's fake boyfriend, who mysteriously moved away the second Ryan said that him and Sophia were over.

Since that whole experience they had grown closer but stayed friends. Ivy felt an invisible line around them at all times, and she was terrified about crossing that line and what the implications could be.

"He was your first and only kiss," Lisa continued, bringing Ivy out of her daze. As they reached home room, they paused before going on. "You haven't dated *anyone* else. I know he's special to you. I just think you should go for it! You're applying for college in California, he *lives* in California. What's the worst that could happen?"

Ivy shook her head, her chest feeling heavy. "I could tell him how I feel, he could tell me he doesn't like me like that. I could lose one of my closest friends that I have had since I was practically born. Oh, and then I could move to California for no reason!"

Lisa poised her lips taking in Ivy's words. "I mean yeah...that's kind of the worst-case scenario. But just trust me on this okay! Let me go to breakfast with you two, and I will tell you honestly if I think he's harbouring feelings for you. You know I have a sixth sense for these things."

Ivy laughed, finally giving in. "Fine. We will all go to breakfast or something, and you can tell me what the vibes are." The girls found their places in the home room, the space was filled with their fellow students flittering around, talking about summer plans, colleges and

signing yearbooks.

In all of the mayhem Ivy was surprised to see Kimberley Kelly making her way over to the girls. Kim was labelled as the most popular girl in the year. The boys wanted her, and the girls wanted to be like her. She wasn't exactly unlikeable which didn't help either.

"Hey Ivy, hey Lisa," Kim said as she handed colourful flyers out to the girls.

"Hey," they both replied, reaching out for the flyers, their eyes scanning the sheet of paper even when Kim spoke.

"My parents are away this weekend, so I'm having an end of junior year party if you wanna come?"

"We'd love to," Lisa replied for Ivy who opened her mouth and quickly closed it. She couldn't help but feel hesitant. Having to hide her powers over the years had made Ivy shy, introverted. Even Lisa didn't know about her abilities, it was kept strictly in the family and extended family.

Ivy always feared using her powers in front of others and what the implications could be. A warm feeling of shame entered her gut as she thought about losing control in the car that morning with James. She didn't *want* to be that way.

But she couldn't deny that because of her fear over her powers she had missed out on different school opportunities. She had been invited to parties before and declined, and she had been asked on dates numerous times and said no. After a while word must have got around that she was too introverted or even too weird, so no one else asked.

Ivy looked down at the flyer with determination, "yeah," she mumbled before blinking and turning her attention onto Kim, smiling grateful. "Thank you for inviting us, it sounds fun."

Kim smiled, "no problem girls."

"Can we bring along our friend?" Lisa asked, grinning ear to ear while Ivy snapped her head to look at her best friend questioningly.

"Sure!" Kim said handing more flyers out and moving onto the teens sat at the back of the classroom.

"Excellent," Lisa replied, beaming as she folded the flyer and put it in her bag.

Ivy sighed and sat down, "you want me to invite Ryan, don't you?"

"If you don't I will!" Lisa laughed taking her seat in front of Ivy. "I follow him on Instagram remember."

Ivy snorted a laugh and pulled out her textbooks. "I'll think about it okay?"

Before Lisa could do more than give Ivy a thumbs up, their home room teacher called them to attention. Ivy shuffled in her seat as Mrs Baker told them not to get too comfy during the summer and to start their college applications. Sentences about letters of recommendation, college fees and essays flew through the air as Ivy looked out of the window at the clear blue sky and smiled. Somewhere up there would be Ryan's plane, he would no doubt be listening to his music, probably drumming his fingers on his knees while Zach played games on his Nintendo 3DS, Lucas and Max by their side.

Ivy looked at her watch and exhaled a slow breath. Not long now, and he would be here. She smiled, her stomach fluttering at all the possibilities they would have over the next few weeks.

She couldn't wait.

James navigated the cafeteria with his tray, moving carefully to the right and then the left as students rushed past.

"Have a good summer James!" Rachel Ackers shouted, as she walked past with her hoard of girls, all of them clutching their yearbooks.

"Thanks Rachel," James mumbled, feeling uncomfortable anytime a girl talked to him. Rachel was one of the most popular girls in his class and he had been partnered with her in science. She had been kind to him ever since, knowing that they wouldn't have got an A if it

wasn't for him. Science wasn't her subject.

"Have a good summer dude," Aaron Thompson said nudging shoulders with James who tried to keep his tray steady. He had the last slice of pizza and he wasn't giving it up for anything, the alternative that looked more like mud than food wasn't worth it.

"You too man," James grinned at Aaron. They were friends from the middle school track team, his growth spurt had been worth it when it meant that he was suddenly good at track, running long distances easily. He couldn't wait to join the high school team, hoping that it would keep him under the radar of 'athletic enough not to be bullied'.

James waved to a few more people he doubted he would see over the summer before heading outside where he knew he would find Sam, Josh and Chris, Chris no doubt having invited his girlfriend Daisy to join them for lunch. Daisy was cool James supposed, but she wasn't into gaming and preferred to steal Chris for make out sessions when his friends needed him to play Call of Duty. But it was all good, they could kiss all summer if they wanted to, because as of that night Zach would be in town and could join the campaign. Zach Sinclair was a year younger than Sam and James, but they were all best friends, brought up more like brothers than anything else.

James looked around the benches, talking to a few of his class mates as he passed. He finally found Sam, Josh, Chris and yes, Daisy sat under one of the trees. He couldn't be mad at their location; the sun was beating down on them today, so a bit of shade was welcome.

"Hey guys," James said as he approached. Putting his tray down and collapsing onto the warm grass.

"Woah," Josh said sitting up and looking at James's tray. "How the hell did you get a pizza slice?!"

James laughed, picking up said slice and taking a bite. "I know right? It was the last one."

"And I'm reduced to this," Josh mumbled in disgust pointing to some brown sludge on his plate.

"What the hell is that?" Sam asked wearily, eating nilla wafers from a box in his bag.

"It's meant to be broccoli bake," Josh muttered, picking at the so-called food with his fork.

James snorted taking another bite of pizza, "since when is broccoli brown?"

"Give me a bite of that pizza," Josh whined as a reply as he moved closer to James.

"Uh oh, no way!" James laughed trying to move the pizza slice away from Josh.

"Just one slice! Common man I'm starving!"

"You can have my cookie okay?"

"No, I want the pizza. And your cookie."

The boys laughed, play fighting over the food until Daisy suddenly spoke up, distracting them from their antics.

"Hi Chloe," Daisy said looking at the girl who was standing shyly in front of them. Chloe Harrington. James immediately felt his cheeks warm up as he and Josh moved away from one another.

"Hi Daisy," Chloe replied with a smile, "I just wanted to see if you wanted to sign my yearbook?"

"Of course!" Daisy said, letting go of Chris's hand and grabbing her own book so the girls could swap them.

Chloe hesitantly joined them on the grass, sitting close to Daisy, but her blue eyes hesitantly looking at James now and again.

James was looking down at his pizza slice, eating it slowly although he felt kind of nauseous. He supposed it wasn't a good thing that anytime Chloe was near she made him feel sick. Definitely couldn't be a positive thing...

"Have you got any plans for the summer?" Daisy asked Chloe who was playing with the hem of her shorts.

"Um, no not really. Just staying in Hawkins, I think. Maybe a trip at the end of the summer?"

"Probably," Sam interjected, smiling kindly at Chloe. "You know how our dads like our 'family' trips."

Chloe laughed, relaxing slightly. It was common knowledge that Steve Harrington and Dustin Henderson were like brothers, and that Sam had grown up with Chloe and her older brother Tyler as if he was one of their siblings. The Harrington's had been at countless parties over the years, an extension of the family. Chloe was even in on the family secret after she had once walked in on James showing Sam his super strength by lifting his best friend up by his thumb.

Maybe that was why he felt so awkward around her? Because she knew his secret. James frowned knowing that wasn't it. After all, he had been around her for years and to be frank she had always kind of annoyed him. Following him around or talking about One Direction or Justin Bieber. James hadn't missed that she was currently wearing a '*Believe*' t-shirt from the Justin Bieber concert she had talked non-stop about. It was tucked into her denim shorts, her long tanned legs curved to the side, her white converses kind of scuffed, and her dark blonde hair long enough that it brushed against her elbows. James looked away quickly, he noticed *too much* about Chloe Harrington.

"Here you go," Daisy said happily handing Chloe's yearbook back to her.

"Thanks," Chloe grinned, but before she could take back her book, Sam gestured towards it and Chloe nodded, smiling in thanks. She watched on as her friend signed the book.

Sam happily scribbled away and then glanced at James, a smirk appearing on his face. "Hey James, wanna sign Chloe's yearbook?"

James suddenly felt everyone's eyes on him and glared at Sam who was having a hard time containing his mischievous grin. James cleared his suddenly dry throat and without looking at Chloe he

mumbled, "sure..."

He reached for her book off Sam, giving him another glare of pure hatred as he took his pen as well for good measure.

James flicked through the book surprised by how full it was. There were names and messages off people that James liked, and then some from idiots, like Shaun Michaels who was a class A douche bag. James couldn't help but feel uncomfortable by the '*have an amazing summer beautiful! ;-**Shaun x*' and quickly turned the page.

Knowing that Chloe was watching him closely, James tried to focus and write something that would be acceptable. He hadn't really *signed* anyone's yearbook, just drew a few images here and there in Sam, Chris and Josh's.

The pressure got to him and James settled for a generic message. '*Have a great summer Chloe! James.*'

"Here you go," James said, coughing awkwardly as he sat up and stretched his arm out to Chloe, the yearbook within his grasp. She got up and took the book from him, holding it to her chest.

"Thanks," she replied slightly breathlessly. She averted her eyes and then looked at Daisy. "Thanks Daisy."

"No problem! See you later?"

"Yeah of course," Chloe said, her tone relaxing again. "Bye guys," she added raising her hand slightly before heading back inside the cafeteria.

James exhaled a quiet breath in relief and went back to his pizza. But only a second later he was disrupted again by Daisy, but this time she was aiming her words at him rather than Chloe.

"Are you an idiot?"

James raised his eyebrow, his mouth full of pizza. "Excuse me?"

Daisy sighed, her palm moving to her forehead as she shook her head. "Oh my god you actually are," she whispered in a pained voice.

"Chloe *loves* you," Chris teased James before putting his arm back around Daisy.

James scowled, "no she doesn't. How many years do I have to tell you this?" It was a broken record and it had been the same since he was a child. James looked at Josh for back up, "come on man, help me out here?"

"You're right."

"Thank you!"

"No not you," Josh sniggered. "Daisy's right. You *are* an idiot. And Chloe is totally in love with you."

James groaned and lay back in the grass, covering his face with his arm while his friends laughed and gossiped away.

"Do you remember the time she got him like 10 valentine's cards?"
Josh laughed, shaking his head in dismay.

"In her defence, we were like six. She probably didn't know what a valentine's card was," James muttered from under his arm.

"Or that time Maci Turner said Chloe had written '*Mrs Wheeler*' all over her notebook?" Chris sniggered.

"Maybe she's in love with Ivy. Or Ben. Or my mom. "

"She also wrote C&J forever."

James blushed, "well maybe Maci was lying."

"Or maybe she *loves* you!" Sam laughed, nudging James in the side with his foot, pushing hard enough to make his best friend jolt and remove his arm from obscuring his reddening face.

"The golden moment has got to be the school play though," Chris laughed, Sam and Josh joining in with him, while Daisy rolled her eyes and James groaned, hiding his face once more.

Sam leaned on his knees, in his element of drama as his stretched his

hands out. "Picture the scene! Chloe's playing Sandy, wig and all. She's singing *Hopelessly Devoted to You*, only she's not looking at the damn paper in the paddling pool. Oh no! She's looking at James Wheeler in the audience, her one true love!"

"She didn't look at me for the *whole* song," James muttered, his face as red as a tomato by this point.

"She totally did," Sam chuckled, "my dad's got it on video man. You can come around and watch it anytime!"

Daisy sighed, "will you guys stop. You're acting like a group of hyenas."

"Thank you," James exhaled in relief. If Daisy was telling the boys off they would calm down, it was just how things worked in their group. James felt safe to sit back up, grabbing his cookie back from Josh just to throw it at him.

"These are Chloe's *feelings* you're laughing over. And if James wants to be an idiot and not accept them, then whatever. But that's not Chloe's fault. So, have a bit of respect."

"Yeah, you're right," Sam cringed, feeling embarrassed as he rubbed the back of his neck. "Chloe is like a sister to me, I shouldn't tease her like this."

"Good. And I won't tell her," Daisy said softly, looking at the boys. "But just no more teasing okay?"

Chris sighed, "I mean we can't *promise*. James is just too easy to tease, but okay, we'll try."

Daisy smiled in triumph, kissing her boyfriend on the cheek. "Good. Now, wanna go make out?"

Chris grinned, nodding his head as he scrambled to his feet.

"You two are disgusting," Josh shuddered, James and Sam nodding in agreement.

Chloe laughed taking Chris's hand. "Oh you're all just jealous that you

don't have girlfriends." She pulled her tongue at them and tugged a very willing Chris along with her towards the bleachers.

Sam snorted, "I'm totally not jealous." He shifted uncomfortably.

"Yeah me neither," Josh laughed, the laugh dying down quite quickly before he went back to eating his cookie.

"Not jealous at all," James added, pulling out his water bottle and taking a swig as his eyes followed Chloe who had just walked back out of the cafeteria with two of her friends. She was smiling and talking avidly, clutching that yearbook to her chest again.

James cleared his throat and looked away, distracting himself the best way he knew. "So, are we gonna play Call of Duty tonight?"

Mike hovered in the entrance of the hospital, looking down at his phone to check the time. With his college students having already finished for the summer, Mike had only had to finish up a bit of paperwork before he was all finished. It was a great feeling, he felt like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders and he couldn't stop the smile on his face. He was free and happy, about to see his beautiful wife and be reunited with his best friend's that evening.

The elevator door opened and El came out, her lunch bag in her hand as she headed in the other direction towards the staff canteen.

Feeling slightly foolish for not standing closer to the elevator, Mike hurried after her. "El!" he called, thankful when she immediately turned around.

Her eyes widened slightly, surprised to see her husband, especially at this early hour. "What's wrong?" she asked, automatically assuming that Mike could only be at the hospital for a negative reason. "Please don't tell me you're injured," she added, closing the distance between them, her hands coming up to touch her husband's face.

Mike couldn't help but laugh, loving how attentive and sweet she was. "I'm *fine*," he reassured her, unable to contain his grin. "I just finished early and wanted to surprise you with lunch."

El immediately softened, her whole body seemed to relax. "That's so sweet," she sighed happily, her eyes looking towards the brown bag that Mike held. "Have you brought Eggos?" She asked hopefully.

Mike grinned, taking the bag in both hands and holding up the Eggos he had microwaved in his college staff room. He knew they would be cold by now, but El never seemed to mind.

"And I bought candy, so you can kind of have an Eggo-extravaganza," Mike said enthusiastically as he showed El the different candies.

El leaned up and pressed a kiss to Mike's lips which he happily returned, his free hand moving to the small of her back. After a moment she pulled back enough to nuzzle his nose with her own, both of them grinning. "What did I do to deserve you huh?"

Mike smiled, shaking his head. "What did I do you mean."

El laughed, "you know we can have this argument all day, right?"

"And I would *gladly* do it all day," Mike teased, making El push him playfully, before grabbing his hand and leading him towards the staff garden.

"It's nice here," Mike commented after he and El had settled on a bench which look towards a small pond, the enclosed space covered in flowers, bushes and a few trees. Mike had his arm around El and she rested her head against his shoulder as she alternated between eating Eggos and candy.

"It is," El mused, taking a deep breath of fresh fragrant air. "They made a peaceful area for us. After everything we see in a day, a calm and quiet garden is just what we need."

Mike stroked through El's hair before leaning down to press a kiss to her golden-brown curls. "You're all heroes for what you do," he said speaking in a gentle voice, not wanting to break the ambience they were currently sheltered in.

El smiled, her eyes on the pond and the way the water rippled slightly. "We're all just doing our best," she admitted quietly. "We care."

"And you do an amazing job."

El looked up at Mike, her eyes warm with gratitude as she met his lips in a soft kiss. "Thank you," she exhaled, a soft hum escaping her lips.

Mike smiled, looking at El with adoration. "Of course," he whispered, kissing her once again before she settled back against his chest. They stayed like that for some time, Mike resumed stroking her hair as he thought back to the events of the morning. His amber eyes flickered around the small garden to see if anyone was close by. He could only see two nurses on a much further bench, talking over two steaming mugs of coffee.

"Ben was a little upset this morning," he blurted out, unsure really how to start the conversation. He guessed from El's sudden jerk to sit up, that he could have probably started this topic much smoother.

"He was?" El asked, her hazel eyes immediately filling with concern for her baby boy. "Why? Did he say? Was it because it was his last day?"

Mike eyed the nurses again and felt they were far enough to be able to go on with the subject. "No, it's not that," he said quietly, turning his attention to El and reaching for her hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. "On the way to school Ivy and James got into a fight..."

"Sounds normal," El reasoned.

"And they started using their powers."

"I hope you told them off!" El immediately responded, her shoulders tense.

Mike sighed, stroking her hand with his thumb. He knew how El worried more than anyone about their children and their powers. They weren't as common, but Mike knew El still had nightmares about the lab. Only this time it involved the kids. He would cradle her after the nightmares, wipe her tears and tell her everything was going to be okay. But he knew that if their kids ever brought attention to their powers, there would be so much that would *have* to

change to protect them.

"No one saw anything," Mike tried soothing El, his eyes fixed on hers, hoping she would see the determination and strength within them. "They were just levitating Ivy's phone. But that's not the point," Mike said knowing that he was getting side tracked. "Ben was upset because they *have* powers and he doesn't. He didn't feel special..."

El's eyes became misty and she shook her head, "that's horrible," she whispered, her voice heavy with emotion. "He has to know that it doesn't matter if he has powers or not. We *love* him, he's our baby boy."

"It's okay babe, I think I did reassure him," Mike responded, smiling gently as he remembered his conversation with Ben. "I told him that we love him and how special and gifted he is. I just...I don't know, it just made me think."

"About what?" El asked softly, her attention completely focused on Mike's eyes.

Mike inhaled and exhaled slowly trying to think of how to word his thoughts. "Ivy got her powers early, James's were a little later. Does Ben have powers and it's just taking its time to manifest?"

They were silent for a moment, both thinking, the cogs in their brains turning rapidly at all of the possibilities. It was El who finally spoke.

"In a way it doesn't matter," she said with a slight smile. "I understand if he gets powers we will need to make sure he can control them and know the risks. But it won't make him any different, he is our *son* and we love him. He needs to know he's special, just as he is. Powers or no powers, it doesn't matter. He is always going to be our baby."

Mike looked at his wife, the way she held herself, the passion in her voice when she spoke of their children. The look of determination and love swirling perfectly within her hazel eyes. She was outstandingly beautiful.

"I love you," Mike whispered, his smiling curving rapidly on his lips, creasing his thin cheeks. "And I love our kids."

El beamed, her smile radiating the beauty that shone from the inside out. "Do you love them even when they are hormonal? Or bickering and fighting over phones and games?"

Mike chuckled, shaking his head in amusement. "Yep," he grinned, pulling El back in for a cuddle. "Even then. They are *our* hormonal, bickering babies. And I wouldn't have them any other way, because yes, I know they can be a pain in the ass! But I know they all have beautiful hearts. And they are going to grow into even greater versions of themselves."

"Agreed," El smiled, kissing Mike's cheek before wrapping her arm around his stomach and squeezing him affectionately. They stayed like that for the remainder of El's shift, taking in the sunshine and enjoying a moment that was just the two of them. Those moments could be quite rare nowadays.

"Do you *have* to go back to work?" Mike whined as he walked El to the lift fifteen minutes later.

She grinned, pressing the button for the elevator before turning to look up at her husband. "I'm sorry honey, but I've got to work. Those kids need me."

"I suppose," Mike sighed, pouting slightly. El laughed, reaching up and tracing Mike's pouted lips making him smile despite himself.

"Once I finish at eight, I've got two glorious weeks off," El exhaled, already daydreaming about the fun they would have. She blinked coming back to reality and turned her attention back to Mike. "Can you pick some stuff up for the party though? I got most of the stuff the other day, but we're missing tortilla chips and we could probably do with some more biscuits and soda."

"No problem leave it with me honey," Mike said smiling as he leaned down and gave El a kiss while the elevator pinged and the doors opened.

"I miss you already," El exhaled, pulling away from Mike's lips with regret and stepping into the elevator.

"I miss you more," Mike smiled, his hands in his pockets and a heaviness starting to fill his chest. It didn't matter how old he got, he *hated* being separated from El. It just didn't feel natural.

El pressed the button for her floor and turned to Mike, "I love you sweetie."

"I love you babe, have a great rest of your shift."

"I will," El said as the doors started to close. She gave Mike a wave and he returned it, feeling sad the moment the doors closed. He ruffled his hair and headed to the exit, trying to remember El's list before deciding it was probably best to write it down. He scooped his phone out of his pocket and started typing. He couldn't help but smile, knowing that in a matter of hours, the Sinclair's, Byers and Henderson's would all be at the Wheeler house.

The party *finally* reunited. It couldn't come sooner.

"I think that banner is slanted," Will teased the moment he walked into the Wheeler house with Jen and the twins Lily and Grace.

"Ha ha," Mike gasped trying to catch his breath as he held up one side of the *Welcome Home!* sign. "You could give me a hand you know!"

"Here let me," Jen laughed, handing Will the bottle of wine they had brought.

"Dad can we go to Ivy's room?" Lily asked, smiling sweetly at her dad.

"Of course," Will grinned watching the twins disappear up the stairs.

"You know they probably said that to get out of helping right?" Mike said pinning the banner in place on his side while Jen got onto a chair on the other side. "Ivy's still getting ready *apparently*, Ben and James have been putting out the snacks, but I've seen them eating more than they're putting out."

Will laughed as he put the wine in the fridge. "I mean they *could* be hiding in Ivy's room. But you know me, those girls have me wrapped around their little fingers."

"Oh hush you, you love that their daddy's girls," Jen laughed as she secured her side of the banner. "Plus, they're probably just wanting to get the gossip on Ryan and Ivy."

The sound of a sharp squeak sounded in the kitchen for a moment as Mike almost fell off the chair he was standing on, it took him a moment to secure himself before he looked at Jen with a bewildered expression. "What gossip about Ryan and Ivy?"

She merely stared at him for a moment, as if waiting for him to catch on, but when there was nothing but silence, she grinned. "Nothing."

Mike looked between Jen and Will and back again, "you can't say gossip about Ryan and Ivy and then say 'nothing'!"

Jen laughed, taking Will's offered hand to help her down from the chair. "Mike if you haven't caught on then I can't help you."

Mike got down from his chair, his brow creased in a frown. "There's nothing going on between them," he told Will and Jen who looked at each other smirking.

"You just tell yourself that Mike," Will chuckled.

"Yeah well, you've got *two* teenage daughters, so you'll experience this twice."

The smile was soon wiped off Will's face while Jen assured him that it would be okay. Mike put the chairs away in the dining room and the trio moved back into the kitchen, getting more food out of the fridge ready to set out.

"They're not dating right?" Mike blurted out randomly as he put chips in a bowl on the kitchen island. Jen was in the garden stringing up the fairy lights with James who was cheating with his powers, Will turned his attention from the cupboard where he was getting out plates to his troubled best friend.

"No, I don't think they're *dating*. But I think there is clearly some feelings there," Will said reasonably as he stacked more plates on the kitchen counter. "I just think you're in denial."

"And what is Michael in denial about today?" Dustin's voice boomed into the kitchen as their Bard walked in with Sam who was holding ingredients for smores and Dart who rushed to find Eggo.

"Is James in the garden?" Sam asked, his neck already craning to look through the French doors.

"Yeah bud," Mike responded, smiling despite his inner anguish. He watched Sam head to the garden and join up with James before he turned back to his friends.

"Do you think Ivy and Ryan are dating?" Mike asked Dustin, his voice strained with concern.

Dustin smiled in mild surprise, looking between Mike and Will in confusion. "Haven't they been dating forever?"

Will laughed and went back to his task, while Mike groaned, stuffing his mouth with potato chips.

The sound of metal scraping metal made Ivy cringe as she pushed each clothes hanger further down the pole, searching for the right outfit for the party. Her amber eyes glanced over a white skater dress that Aunt Holly had bought her the previous summer. It had a black firefly design across the material and Ivy supposed it wasn't *too* formal, but not too casual either.

Ivy pulled the dress out of the closet and threw off her skirt and sweater. She looked in the mirror as she dressed, insecurities gathering in her mind. *Are my boobs too small? Are my legs too long and thin? Is my butt too small? Should my body be curvier?*

She thought about all of the girls on social media, the reality stars and their perfect bodies and sighed. "It's not real," Ivy repeated her mother's words to herself in a whisper. "It's filters, angles and lighting."

Ivy pulled the white dress over her body and adjusted the material, looking at her reflection as she smoothed down the dress and pulled the short sleeves down slightly. The dress hit just above the knee and

Ivy twirled slightly to make the skirt fabric move.

She smiled hesitantly and grabbed her phone, taking a photo of herself before sending it to Lisa.

Ivy: What do you think?

She was relieved to see Lisa had already seen the message and was typing a response.

Lisa: QUEEN! 🌹 Perfect combo of sexy and cute! 🔥

Ivy: Thanks babe 🌹 Love you xxx

Lisa: Love you! Have fun 😊 xxx

Feeling a little more empowered Ivy put her phone on her docking speaker and shuffled her music, sitting at her vanity table and going through her make up bag. The piano intro to *A Thousand Years* began to play and Ivy smiled, closing her eyes for a moment as nostalgia hit her.

"Heart beats fast, colours and promises," Ivy began to sing, pulling out her moisturiser and primer. "How to be brave, how can I love when I'm afraid to fall? But watching you stand alone, all of my doubt suddenly goes away somehow!"

Two familiar voices sang from the hallway, "one step closer!"

Ivy giggled as her cousins poked their heads around the door. "Can we come in please?" Lily asked with a big grin.

"We're going to have to sort stuff out for the party otherwise," Grace added, with a pleading pout.

Ivy giggled, beckoning them in. "Come in, come in." The twins headed for her bed, both of them landing gracefully.

"You look beautiful!" Lily said, her green eyes appraising Ivy's dress.

"Totally gorgeous," Grace agreed with a smile as she shuffled further up the bed.

"Stop you're making me blush," Ivy laughed, smoothing moisturisers onto her freshly washed face.

"It's true though!" Grace said as she reached for one of Ivy's nail polishes from her bedside table. "And you don't even *need* make up. Can I use this nail polish?"

"Sure," Ivy said turning back to the vanity table and looking at her cousins now and again in the mirror. "And I do need the make-up," she added picking up her primer. "I'm so pale."

"I'd rather have pale skin than pimples," Lily sighed, looking at her own face in the mirror.

"You have like two pimples," Grace muttered as she carefully painted her nails pink. "I've got like a hundred."

"You don't," Lily and Ivy said in unison.

"They'll go, I promise," Ivy reassured her cousins, turning back to give them a confident smile. "I had really bad acne, but I've got a great face wash now that keeps it at bay, it's like manuka honey and tea tree."

"Ooh, can I go and take a look at it?" Lily asked, sitting up.

"Of course, it's in the bathroom."

Ivy finished putting on her primer as Lily walked back in with the face wash in her hands, reading the back of the bottle. "You know they're talking about you down there, I could hear them."

Ivy sighed, rolling her eyes as she picked a creamy eyeshadow. "Let me guess, about me and Ryan?"

"Yep," the twins said in unison even though Grace hadn't even left the room.

"They're debating whether you and Ryan are dating or not," Lily said with a smirk as she looked up at Ivy. "You're not, are you?"

Ivy cleared her throat, "no we're not..." She kept her hands busy,

picking her best mascara and unscrewing the lid. "We're just friends."

The twins looked at each other for a moment before Grace went back to painting her nails and Lily took a photo of the face wash.

Maybe it was the fact that Ivy felt no pressure from her cousins to speak about Ryan, that she actually found herself talking about him. She twirled around in her chair to look at them and sighed.

"I just don't know how to act around him anymore. He's the only guy I've ever really...well, he's special but he's also my *best friend*. And he lives in *California!* If anything happened, it would be so painful to be away from him."

"But isn't it painful being away from him now?" Grace said wisely, before she blew her nails, trying to dry them.

Ivy said nothing, thinking of how she always felt when Ryan arrived and how she always felt when he left. It was painful to see him go, she didn't feel right, like he took a part of her back to California with him. And technology had always helped over the years with that separation, like video calls and free messaging services. But it still wasn't the same as having him here in the flesh.

"It just makes me feel awkward knowing that everyone is talking about me and him. Like I feel like they will be watching us or something."

Lily sighed, braiding her straight brown hair. "Yeah some people are gonna be watching you two. And I know it's easier said than done, but you just need to forget about everyone else and just be *yourself* with him. He won't be here forever, so just enjoy the time you have together."

"Yeah," Grace encouraged, smiling at a nervous looking Ivy. "Screw everyone else! Just be yourself Ivy. No matter what happens or doesn't happen romantically, he's still going to be your best friend. So just treat him like that."

Ivy felt a weight leave her chest and she smiled at her cousins, "I don't think fifteen-year olds are meant to be this wise."

Lily laughed, "isn't our dad's nickname Will the Wise?"

"Yeah it is. Wisdom is in our blood," Grace snorted making Ivy laugh.

The girls finished getting ready together, turning the music up, singing along to Rihanna *We Found Love* as Ivy finished braiding Lily's hair for her, carefully perfecting two French braids while Grace painted her sister's nails.

The moment was finally disrupted by commotion downstairs, dogs barking and Mike shouting "girls! They're here!"

Ivy felt her stomach drop and she looked at the twins anxiously, they gave her smiles of encouragement and pulled her along.

"Just be yourself," Lily reiterated while Ivy smiled tightly, hoping that she would be able to relax. But there really was no more time left to figure it out. The Sinclair's were here. *Ryan* was here.

"Let the summer begin!" Grace practically squealed with excitement, the music from the surround sound playing downstairs luring them closer.

"Yeah," Ivy choked. "Let the summer begin."

2. Feels like Home

Notes for the Chapter:

AN: Hi everyone! Well looks who is back with another chapter! 🎉♀️

I first of all just want to thank everyone so much for the amazing response that I got on chapter one! On here and the other sites I write on and on Instagram. I was so nervous about starting this story, even having literal nightmares! I just thought no one would care anymore. But the fact that so many of you do, and that you have embraced the new characters makes me happier than I can ever explain. So thank you all! 😊

I'll admit this chapter is a bit of a filler, but enjoy it for the crazy fun that it is! The story has barely begun yet and we've still got so many original characters to make their debuts. It will all come in time 🌟

Warning - For use of a bit of swearing aka cursing!

The Life We Deserve

Chapter 2 – Feels like Home

Ryan leaned his head against the cold glass window of the car, his wireless headphones pushing slightly against his head as the uneven ground of the old Hawkins road made the glass vibrate.

'When she was just a girl she expected the world. But it flew away from her reach, so she ran away in her sleep. And dreamed of para-para-paradise, para-para-paradise, para-para-paradise. Every time she closed her eyes.'

Ryan nodded his head slightly to the music as he scrolled through his

Instagram feed, tapping videos of skateboard tricks he loved, saving some to his collection to try out later. His phone displayed a new direct message and he hesitated to open it, knowing it was from Drew his best friend back in California, probably wanting to torture him some more.

Drew: Have you seen her yet? 😊

Ryan: We're on our way now.

Drew: Are you gonna kiss her? 🥺🥺🥺🥺🥺

Ryan rolled his eyes, exhaling a frustrated breath as he shuffled further into the corner of the seat, not wanting Zach to see the messages. His brother continued playing on his game and thankfully paid him no attention.

Ryan: No, you dick 😡

Drew: What not even a bit of tongue?! 🤪 😊

Ryan: Yeah why not! Hey Ivy! How you doing? I haven't seen you since spring break, but hey here's my tongue down your throat 😏

Drew: LMAO! 🤪 🤪 🤪 She might like it! 🤪

Ryan: You're banned from giving me any advice.

Drew: Oh come on! Hey don't you remember when I said you should get a fake girlfriend to make her jealous? 😳 I miss Sophia 🤪 🔥

Ryan: You say that like she was a real person. Also, it was crap advice because she then went and got herself a boyfriend! 🤪

Drew: Ah Enrique. Do you remember how jealous you used to get?! 😳

Ryan flinched as Zach hit him in the leg, he turned to glare at his brother wondering what his problem was, but Zach was merely pointing at their mom who had turned in the passenger seat to look at him. He hurried to pull his headphones down, they rested on his neck like a collar.

"Sorry," Ryan mumbled, pausing his music and wondering how long his mom had been calling his name.

"I'll forgive you as long as you were listening to good music," Max joked, Lucas laughing by her side as he indicated and turned down the long drive that led to the Wheeler house.

Ryan smirked, "a bit of Cold Play, Swedish House Mafia...oh and MJ of course." He knew he had his mom's approval as she smiled proudly, nodding her head in agreement.

"I knew I brought my boys up right," Max sighed happily, reaching out to try and ruffle Zach's short hair, but he darted out of her reach, sitting up straight in his seat.

"Um *hello*, I brought them up too," Lucas coughed, sounding offended which his sons knew was just an act.

"Oh yeah," Max sniggered, pinching Lucas's cheek affectionately. "You were there too."

Lucas smiled despite himself and reached for Max's hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. Ryan shook his head and quickly responded to Drew '*Let's not talk about this now.*' And then mumbled to his parents, "you guys are so weird."

"They always get hyper when we're back in Hawkins," Zach said knowingly, his eyes leaving his screen for a moment to scrutinize his parents before going back to his game.

Max laughed and turned to look at her sons again, "are you telling me you're not excited to see everyone? To see James?" She directed towards Zach who shrugged.

"I'm excited," he admitted, pausing his game to look at his mom. "But I'm excited in like humanly acceptable ways." Zach side eyed Ryan and a mischievous smile curved his lips, "but I'm sure *Ryan* is as crazy eyed excited as you two."

Ryan's eyes narrowed as he looked at his little brother. Twelve-year olds weren't meant to be this sassy.

"Zach don't tease your brother," Max said to her youngest son, but unable to stop the smile on her face. Things had always been very relaxed in their small family, yes, their parents disciplined them when needed, but they were also their friends.

"Thanks mom," Ryan mumbled, turning off his headphones and putting them in his bag.

"Yeah Zach," Lucas added as they started to approach Mike and El's house which was situated on the edge of the woods. "Don't tease your brother about how excited he is to see Ivy."

"Dad!" Ryan shouted in exasperation. His cheeks heating as he tried and failed to hide his embarrassment.

Max, Lucas and Zach burst out laughing. "Sorry son, it was just too easy," Lucas chuckled as he pulled into the busy drive, parking Grandpa Charles's car which they had borrowed for the journey next to Mike's Volvo.

They had been picked up from the airport that morning by Jada and Charles Sinclair who had taken their son, grandchildren and daughter in law out for breakfast and then back to the old family home where they played board games and sat in the garden together. Ryan loved being outside, back in California most of his time was spent at the skate park or on the beach with Drew and the rest of the gang.

Hawkins was always a bit of a culture shock compared to California. It was behind in the times and Ryan tried to pretend he hadn't heard the whispers growing up. Sometimes it was hard to ignore. He smiled slightly as a memory of being eight years old came back to him, he was in the playground with Ivy and she punched a kid three years older than them for calling Ryan the n word. She swore it was her only time punching someone and always beamed with pride at the memory of defending Ryan. He supposed that was around the time that his crush on her had begun.

Because that was all it had been. A crush. Yep...just a crush. Ryan would remind himself of this anytime he slipped into a dream and awoke sweating and embarrassed. It was a crush, he didn't *love* Ivy. Not in that way. She was his best friend, his oldest friend and nothing

was going to get in the way of that. He would rather die than ruin their relationship. So those feelings would remain boxed up and he would get over said crush, because crushes were easy to get over. It's wasn't like he was in lo -

"So, are you going to get out of the car or will I have to drag you?"

Max's voice broke through Ryan's intense thoughts and he blinked, looking around and realising that his dad and Zach had already got out of the car and were being greeted at the front door by Mike, Will and Dustin who were smiling ear to ear as they hugged Lucas.

Ryan hurried to grab his bag and cleared his throat, "sorry I'm coming now."

Max reached out for her son, her hand gripping his shoulder gently to stop him for a moment. She smiled softly, her blue eyes kind. "It's going to be okay honey. Just be yourself."

Ryan pretended he didn't know what she was getting at but smiled, even though it wavered nervously. "Thanks mom."

"You're welcome, now let's go inside and see our friends!"

Ryan nodded in agreement, trying to pretend that his throat wasn't getting tight and that his heart wasn't picking up speed. He followed his mom up the path, for a moment realising how tiny she was. Had she always been that small? Or had he just stretched some more over the last few months?

He didn't have any more time to question his height when he was engulfed by his extended family, he couldn't help but smile as he hugged everyone.

"Geez how tall are you Ry!" Dustin chuckled pulling the teenager into a bone crunching hug. "You're rivalling Mike!"

"Not just yet," Mike grinned as Dustin released the seventeen-year-old. Ryan felt instantly awkward looking at Ivy's dad. It hadn't always been like this of course. Mike was kind of like an uncle, he was one of Ryan's godfather's and had always been protective of Ryan growing up. But over the years, their relationship seemed to change.

Ryan supposed it was since he and Ivy were thirteen and had a chaperoned 'date' with Mike barely giving them space to breathe.

Ryan wondered if Mike knew that they had kissed the moment he was out of sight? *I probably wouldn't be here if that was the case*, he couldn't help but think to himself. *Man, if he knew the things I thought about now –*

"It's good to see you," Mike said giving him a hug, short and sweet as they pulled back awkwardly.

"Yeah you too," Ryan said clearing his throat whilst trying to maintain a smile.

"Have you missed me?" His mom thankfully cut in, pulling Mike into a hug.

"No," he replied before laughing as Max shoved him away, muttering curse words at him under her breath, only making them both grin like the strange friends they were. Ryan shook his head in bewilderment but was overwhelmed once again with hugs, this time from Will, Jen, Ben and a clap on the back from James.

"Nice to see you man," James said with a genuine smile, his eyes filled with excitement as he turned to Zach. "Come on dude! We've got to show you our game. Sam!"

"James can I come too?" Ben practically begged. Ryan was sure the ten-year-old probably didn't appreciate it, but he kind of looked adorable.

James looked over at Mike and then leant down to Ben, "yes but not a word of this to mom or dad okay?"

Ben grinned, nodding his head as he hurried after his brother, Sam and Zach. Ryan shook his head in amusement, trying to contain his smile so to not look suspicious as the boys headed up the stairs like a stampede of animals.

"*James!*" called a voice that Ryan would know *anywhere*. His stomach felt incredibly tight and he felt hypersensitive of his movements as his eyes slowly moved to the stairs.

"Sorry girls," James rushed to say as he past his sister and cousins who he had almost knocked over in his haste to get to his bedroom. The boys followed him in single file and uttered similar apologies to the girls as they zoomed past.

"Honestly, are they animals or something," Ivy sighed as she carried on down the stairs with the twins who laughed.

Ryan was stood still, unable to move if he wanted to. He watched Ivy, his eyes hungrily taking in everything about her. The way her long wavy black hair swayed as she hopped down each step, the way her white dress clung to her waist and then came out slightly. The way her long legs in her white converses moved so elegantly.

She saw him, and Ryan blinked in surprise, their eyes catching one another. Those amber eyes, her lips and the way they stretched into a sweet smile, showing off her beautiful cheekbones. *It's just a crush, it's just a crush, it's just a crush.*

"Hi," Ivy said, her voice soft, almost breathy. Her eyes were sparkling, *oh man had they always done this?*

"Er...um, h-hi," Ryan croaked out, his brown eyes widening slightly at his stupidity. Before he could try and attempt to say anything else Ivy was hugging him, and just like that he melted. His arms tightening around her, her head just reaching his shoulder making Ryan kneel down a little further to rest his chin on the curve of her neck. He closed his eyes, exhaling a long shaky breath.

At last. He was home.

"I missed you," Ivy said quietly, not moving out of their embrace.

Ryan felt his stomach swoop and he tried to swallow the lump in his throat. "I missed you too," he whispered back knowing that his words were an understatement. He thought about Ivy all the time, in a strictly friendship way of course...

"I'm so excited you're here," Ivy sighed happily, tightening her hold on him. "We're gonna have a great summer."

"Yeah," Ryan couldn't help but grin, relaxing for a moment. "An

amazing summer." He opened his eyes and immediately caught the stare of Mike who was watching him from across the room where he had just handed a drink to Dustin.

Ryan coughed awkwardly and pulled out of the embrace, taking a step back as he rubbed at the back of his neck. "Should we get a drink?" he said to Ivy, trying to ignore her slightly hurt expression.

"Yeah," she said with a small smile that didn't reach those sparkling eyes.

Ryan followed Ivy, giving Lily and Grace a hug on the way to the kitchen island which had been set out with drinks and snacks. "This all looks great!" he couldn't help but admit as he reached for a can of soda.

"I did it all by myself," Ivy said dramatically as she reached for a pizza slice, giggling at the deadpan look that her dad gave her.

"Sure you did honey," Mike said sarcastically, handing Ivy a soda can when she started eyeing up the cocktails Jen had made. She pulled her tongue at him but took the soda can with no complaint.

Max came up next to Ivy and picked up a pizza slice. "No, this buffet has the workings of Mike Wheeler written all over it."

"What do you mean?" Mike asked wearily, his eyes narrowed as he watched Max inspect his design.

"It looks like a map in D&D," the red head said simply as she scrutinised the fruit salad.

Mike snorted, "it does *not*!"

"Oh my god she's totally right," Dustin whispered gobsmacked as he stepped up to analysis the so-called map of food. "It looks like – "

"Phandalin!" Will answered for him, his eyes filled with excitement as he picked up a cookie.

Ivy, Ryan and the twins all exchanged looks and headed to the garden away from the 'grown ups'.

"Man you are so sad," Lucas laughed at Mike who was going red. "You need to get a life."

"To be fair it was *your* wife who recognised it first," Dustin sniggered to Lucas.

"First of all, *his wife* has a name – "

"Oh sorry, *Maxine*."

Max threw a carrot stick at Dustin, the orange baton getting caught in his hair.

"It's like time never passed," Jen laughed as she propped herself up on one of the stools and poured her and Max a cocktail.

"Except we're missing some members of the party," Will said looking around the room.

"Yeah what time do El and Laura finish work Wheeler?" Max asked sitting on the stool next to Jen as they chinked cocktail glasses.

Mike looked up at the clock, squinting slightly. Maybe his reading glasses were going to become more regular than he would like. "They finished at eight. I know they change out of their scrubs at the hospital. They should be with us in thirty minutes I'd say?"

"Yeah probably," Dustin agreed pulling a nilla wafer from Mike's monument of the Shrine of Luck. He tried and failed not to look disappointed at his map, *totally not a map*, being destroyed.

"You realise all the kids have abandoned us, right?" Lucas said to the party as he grabbed a can of soda. Him and Dustin were the designated drivers for the evening.

Max shrugged, "we're too cool for them." She jumped off her seat, cocktail glass in hand and wandered over to the surround sound system. "Now," she said searching through the music on her phone and plugging it in. "Let's get this party started!"

The iconic introduction to *Beat It* by Michael Jackson started to play to no one's surprise. Lucas clapped his hands together, "now this is

more like it."

The garden looked beautiful as the sun fell across the horizon. Hundreds of string lights were strung from the trees to the house which Ivy knew would stay up until the weather changed dramatically in the fall. The breeze smelt like summer, fresh grass and the slight burning smell of the flickering flames in the fire pit that Grandpa Hopper had recently installed in the centre of the garden.

It was the focal point and where Ivy, Ryan and the twins stood. The girls laughing as Ryan moonwalked around the firepit, *Billie Jean* playing through the house and entering the garden with its amazing beat.

"How did you learn how to do that?" Lily laughed as she attempted the movements. Ivy watched on from where she sat on one of the deck chairs, Grace perched at the edge.

"My dad taught me," Ryan said proudly, moving around like he was walking on air. "I mean it would be better on different flooring, and with socks on but whatever."

Ivy couldn't take her eyes off him, her gaze sometimes disrupted with flames as Ryan moved to the other side of the pit. He was even taller now, but it suited him. She would have imagined that he would have slimmed down even more because of his extra height but he was broader, his shoulders looked strong and Ivy knew from their embrace that his body *felt* strong. She was thankful of the darkening sky that hid her blush as she gulped down her can, feeling too warm.

"So why did your dad learn to moonwalk?" Lily asked as she tried to slide one foot backwards.

Ryan shrugged casually, his hands in his yellow hoodie pockets. "He said it was to impress my mom." His eyes met Ivy's for a second and they both looked away, the air feeling a little heavier.

The twins thankfully felt the tension and moved the conversation on. "Have you started thinking about college Ryan?" Grace asked,

opening the marshmallow packet that they had stolen from the kitchen. "Do you even wanna go?"

"I'm not sure," Ryan replied, stopping his moonwalking and sitting in the deck chair next to Grace and Ivy.

"I think I'd rather look at an apprenticeship or something. You know, get straight into the industry."

"But would you stay in California?" Ivy asked, hoping her question came across casual.

"I think so," Ryan said as he watched Grace hand Lily marshmallows, her twin then skewering them ready for toasting. He looked back at Ivy and smiled, "I would probably stay with mom and dad and save to get my own place."

"That would be so cool," Lily sighed dreamily. "You could get a place right on the beach."

Ivy laughed, "he already practically lives on the beach! It's only a 10-minute walk." She smiled thinking of all of the trips to California, the fun they had in the ocean and Max and Lucas's swimming pool, the games, the laughter, the sunsets, the innocence. They were some of Ivy's favourite memories.

"Are you still surfing?" Ivy asked her best friend, relaxing back slightly in the deck chair, finally feeling comfortable. The anxiety building up to see Ryan again had been horrendous, but she should have known it would be okay. They had been best friends since they were practically born, nothing was going to ruin their bond. Well she hoped so anyway.

Ryan laughed, the sound of his laughter sending such warmth through Ivy's heart that she couldn't help but smile. "Yeah of course!" he said grinning. "Have you not seen my photos on Instagram?"

"Of course!" Ivy laughed, a little more high-pitched than normal. Yes, she had seen the photos. Ryan in his swimming trunks, a bright and happy smile on his face, his surf board under his strong arm. Beads of water visible on his half naked body, his olive-skinned abs sun

kissed...

Ivy shuffled in her seat almost making Grace fall off. "Sorry," she mumbled to her cousin who merely chuckled and waved her off casually like it was nothing.

"Well we know you're still skate boarding," Lily spoke up, helping Ivy out of her awkward moment. "Your videos are so cool!"

"Yeah?" Ryan asked, a smile of satisfaction on his face. His brown eyes flickered to Ivy again, "do you still have your board?"

"Of course!" Ivy replied almost offended. It was the first real gift she had got off Ryan that hadn't been paid for by Max and Lucas.

"And have you learnt any tricks?" Ryan commented, a teasing grin on his face that did nothing to help Ivy's racing heart.

"Well my teacher's been in California, so what do you think?"

Ryan laughed, unzipping his bag and pulling out his own skate board. Ivy eyed up the bag wondering how it fit in there, was it Mary Poppins bag or something? Her attention was brought back to Ryan as he stood up and held his hand out to her, her gaze looked between his hand and his expressive eyes.

"Come on, I'll give you a lesson."

"Um no...no way," Ivy said shaking her head as Grace got up from the bottom of the deck chair.

"Aw do it Ivy! It'll be fun!"

Ivy turned to Grace and raised her eyebrow, "I'll probably break my leg."

"Ryan won't let that happen, will you Ry?" Lily offered, looking at the teenage boy with reproach.

He laughed and gestured with his hand while saying solemnly, "cross my heart and hope to die. I promise I won't let you get hurt."

"You know promises are like sacred in my family right?" Ivy tested Ryan, stretching out her hand to him. He bent his pinky around her pinky and grinned.

"Yes, I'm very aware. I *promise*."

Ivy sighed and let Ryan help her up, she couldn't pretend she didn't like holding his hand, it made her feel safe. It just felt *right* somehow.

"Okay so we'll just start simple," Ryan said as he stood in front of his skate board and suddenly flipped it upside down and back the right way, landing perfectly on it.

Ivy looked from the skate board to her best friend and then back down again. "Are you kidding me?!" she said in disbelief. "That's not simple!"

Ryan grinned mischievously, "I know but it's gonna be hilarious watching you attempt it."

Ivy narrowed her eyes at him, "oh you're going to regret saying that."

Ryan opened his arms in welcome and gestured to the skate board between them. Ivy kept her narrowed eyes on her best friend as she carefully stood on the board, the wheels moving slightly. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. It was silent for a moment, Ryan and the twins watching on.

Ivy put all her energy into the move, knowing the second she flipped the skate board that she was about to fall on her ass. She focused herself, and an invisible force kept her from falling and helped her steady herself back onto the skate board as it flipped the right way around. It was the same force that kept her still when the board finally came to a halt.

"Woo!" Lily shouted, clapping her hands.

"You did it!" Grace joined in, cheering a melted marshmallow in Ivy's direction as she smugly got off the board.

Ryan was giving her a look she knew too well, entertained judging. "What?" she asked him unable to contain her giggles at his

expression.

"You used your powers."

"There were no rules against it," Ivy shrugged taking a prepared s'more off Lily, her eyes darting to the kitchen for a moment hoping her dad hadn't seen her. But the parents all looked like they were too busy dancing and talking to notice.

"Come on," Ryan exhaled in amused frustration. "That's cheating! Do it properly. I won't let you fall. Want me to stand behind you?"

Ivy chewed on her s'more considering Ryan's offer, she hated that she enjoyed a challenge. "Fine," she said after swallowing the delicious marshmallow, chocolate and cracker treat.

The twins watched on from the deck chairs as Ivy stood in front of the skate board, keeping her eyes on the board, very aware of the fact that Ryan was stood so close behind her.

"Okay so I'd put your foot here," he pointed out, his own sneaker coming into view as he indicated a section of the board. "And then here."

Ivy nodded like she was listening but in reality, she was trying to control her breathing, hoping her shoulders weren't rising and falling too much and praying that Ryan couldn't see the goose bumps that raised on her arms every time his breath caught on her exposed neck.

"Ready?" he asked with excitement in his voice.

"Yeah!" *Nope.*

Ivy took a determined breath and got in position, counting to three in her head before going for it, putting everything into the move and perfecting it. Only she didn't of course, and immediately stumbled back into Ryan, only wounding him slightly in the chest with her flailing arms as he caught her.

"Woah, woah, woah!" he said, tightening his grip on her waist.

Ivy could feel herself going pink unsure if it was the feeling of Ryan's

large palms against the soft material of her dress or the fact that she fell like an idiot. "I told you!" she huffed in embarrassment as Ryan steadied her back up, the twins trying and failing not to giggle.

When Ryan snorted in amusement, tears of laughter filling his eyes, Ivy turned in his hold and started shoving him playfully. He continued to laugh as she chased him around the garden.

"You're screwed!" she shouted while Ryan dodged her again and again. The twins watched them for a moment before looking at each other.

"Should we go inside?" Grace whispered.

A knowing smile appeared on Lily's face. "Yeah," she said getting up from the deck chair quietly, although she was sure no amount of noise would distract Ryan and Ivy from one another.

"They're on me, they're on me!" James shouted, his thumbs moving quickly on the Xbox controller as he tried to get his character to run for cover.

"Shit, shit, shit, shit!" Sam exclaimed as he too tried to hide from the onslaught that was happening on the game.

"How did you even get this game?" Ben asked in confusion, holding up the case for *Call of Duty: Black Ops II*. His own character had been killed a few minutes earlier.

"Tyler Harrington," James and Sam said in unison, their attention fully on the screen.

"Yeah he smuggled the game past our parents for us" Sam added, his lips curving into a smile. "He's awesome."

"He drives his dad's beat up old BMW and he's *still* cool," Zach said shaking his head before jumping to attention when his character was almost shot at.

"That car is lame," James muttered before adding "I'd have a Tesla. They are *so* cool."

Zach nodded in agreement before cursing when his character was dealt a fatal shot. "Oh man," he whined, putting down the wireless controller. "Who the hell is bieblove_13?"

"Oh shit did bieblove get you?!" Sam asked in a panic. "I didn't know they were playing tonight. They're *ruthless*!"

"No, no, no!" James shouted, his thumbs working tirelessly but it wasn't enough. Another victim of bieblove_13. "*Shit! I hate that guy!* He's too good!"

"Come on Sam it's all down to you now!" Zach encouraged, the boys gathering around their friend who had beads of sweat developing on his brow.

"I can do this," he whispered tensely, his eyes wide with attention, barely blinking if he could help it. He ran into a building, swiftly moved out of the way when shots were fired. He hurried up the stairs only to be confronted with –

"NO!" Sam practically screamed, his death scene playing back from bieblove_13's point of view. He dropped his controller and fell back against the carpet in defeat.

"I'm sorry bieblove got you," Ben said unable to stop grinning as he patted Sam sympathetically on the shoulder.

"We'll get him," James stated, his eyes narrowed as he stared at the screen. "By the end of this summer we *will* defeat bieblove_13!"

"Yes sir!" Ben teased, saluting his brother. The boys all grinned and started to prepare for another campaign.

"Hey!" Zach said remembering something as the boys settled back on the floor with new drinks. He started to root through his rucksack, searching for something. "I bet I'd get that guy with *this*!"

James, Sam and Ben stared at what looked like a flimsy home-made weapon that had seen better days.

"You're going to take bieblove out with a sling shot?" Sam asked unable to stop from laughing, clearly wondering how that could be at

all dangerous.

Zach sighed heavily, frustrated that the boys hadn't seen the genius of the weapon. He held it back up, narrowed his eyes and deepened his voice to the best of his ability. "This isn't just a sling shot my friends. My dad calls this *the wrist rocket!* Or...*the monster killer!*"

The boys looked at one another in silence for a moment, before snorting with amusement.

"Wanna see it in action?" Zach dared them, his eyebrow raising with mischief.

James sighed, sitting up. "Number one, that sounds really dangerous. Number two, hell yeah, let's do it!"

If someone had asked Mike to describe the current state of his kitchen, his answer would be loud, warm and crazy. The men played cards against humanity, the map of food pushed further up the kitchen island.

"Are you just going to put inappropriate answers to *everything?*" Lucas mumbled in annoyance to Dustin who had just won another round and was grinning smugly.

"Until I run out of inappropriate answers, absolutely!"

Max's Michael Jackson playlist was still playing while the red head and Jen sang into their empty cocktail glasses.

"Hey pretty baby with the high heels on!" Max sang, dancing in front of the sound system like she was on stage. "You give me fever like I've never, ever known!"

"You're just a product of loveliness, I like the groove of your walk, your talk, your dress!" Jen joined in, moving her shoulders to the beat.

"I feel your fever from miles around!" came two new voices making Max and Jen spin around to see El and Laura walk in dancing. Everyone cheering at their arrival, the air full of fun and alcohol.

"Just kiss me baby and tell me twice!" Max sang to El, her face ecstatic with the arrival of her best friend who she hadn't seen in the flesh for three months.

"That you're the one for me!" El sang out, "the way you make me fe –" She couldn't get any more out as she was suddenly bombarded with Max picking her up and twirling her around. The girls all laughed, and the boys rolled their eyes in amusement, their smirks showing that they were used to this behaviour from their wives.

"Max don't drop her." Mike warned, watching as El squealed and laughed.

"I would never drop her!" Max shouted, "she's my precious Ellie!"

El grinned, finally being released from her best friend's hold. "So, I'm guessing there's no cocktails left?"

"Oops," Max giggled as she hugged Laura and El gave a very drunk light weight Jen an affectionate squeeze.

"We've got wine in the fridge babe?" Mike offered, moving away from the game. Lucas threw his cards at a chuckling Dustin, telling him that all of his answers were disgusting, and he was going to hell.

"Ooh yes that sounds lovely," El smiled taking off her jacket and joining Mike as he pulled more glasses out of the cupboard. She leaned her head on his arm, sighing a happy "hi."

Mike set the glasses down and pulled El into his arms, his heart lulling blissfully at their closeness. "Hi beautiful," he exhaled softly, leaning down to kiss his wife.

"So, what are we playing?" Laura asked with intrigue as she moved over to Dustin, he greeted his wife with a kiss and put his arm around her, nuzzling her blonde hair with his nose and grinning.

"Cards Against Humanity. And I'm winning."

Lucas rolled his eyes, "he's sick Laura. You should have seen some of the cards he's pulled out."

Dustin picked up his used cards and showed them to Laura who burst out laughing much to Lucas's surprise.

He shook his head at the couple, "you two are meant to be."

"Oh no!" Max whined when her playlist finished. She picked up her phone and started to go through her iTunes, her brow frowned in concentration, her thumbs fumbling slightly.

"Put on an eighties mix," Will called, handing Jen a glass of water and a pizza slice.

"Yeah I'm trying," Max mumbled, concentrating with all her might and swaying slightly on the spot. Lucas chuckled at his drunk wife and put down his cards to come and help her.

"No!" she whined trying to pull the phone away from him, "ugh you've pulled out the cable."

Lucas laughed, "I have not! It's just not working properly. Here..."

The twins suddenly appeared from the garden, shutting the French doors and hurrying through the kitchen. Jen swayed in Will's arms and called out to their daughters.

"Girls! Where are you going?"

Lily and Grace slowly turned around, hoping to have snuck past. The look of disappointment on their faces was evident. They walked back to their mom and spoke quietly, "can we watch Kardashians in the living room?"

Will frowned, "girls you should be socialising with the others."

"And we have been!" Grace said earnestly.

Lily cleared her throat and whispered, "but we wanted to give Ivy and Ryan some alone time."

"Give Ivy and Ryan some alone time?!" Jen shouted, her eyes squinting as she tried to hear her daughters in her drunk state.

The twins rolled their eyes in annoyance and both eyed up Mike who had suddenly stiffened up, his neck craning to try and see out in the garden.

Max and Lucas were still bickering over the problem with the audio on the surround sound as the twins hurried past with more snacks, heading to the living room. "Hey it's playing!" Max shouted, pointing at her phone.

Lucas shook his head trying not to laugh, "yes but babe there's no sound."

Mike frowned looking out at the garden trying to spot Ivy and Ryan. "Do you think I should call them in? They shouldn't be out there... *alone* together."

El laughed, "honey they're fine. Just leave them be."

"Yeah, just let them chill and have fun," Dustin shrugged, shuffling the cards ready for the next game. "It's not like they're going to have s – "

'LIKE A VIRGIN! TOUCHED FOR THE VERY FIRST TIME!'

"Ah it's working!" Max practically screamed over the music that boomed from the sound system, Lucas fumbling to turning it down so they could all hear themselves think.

"That music's too inappropriate," Mike cringed walking over to Max. "They're gonna hear it!"

Max shook her head, holding her phone in a tight grip. "No, it's Madonna. And a *classic*. What do you think is going to happen Wheeler? You think they're going to hear it and just start having *sex*?"

Mike blushed while Dustin laughed.

"Yeah don't be a hypocrite Mike," Lucas frowned, taking Max's phone out of her hand. "We all know what you and El were getting up to when you were much younger than Ryan or Ivy!"

Mike spluttered for words while the group sniggered, he turned to

look at El who gave him a look of sympathy but merely shrugged her shoulders.

"I'm sorry!" she told him, laughing softly. "But they're right. I'm sure they're just talking out there anyway. But they are *both* responsible. You've just got to let them be. Okay?"

"Yeah okay," Mike sighed, relinquishing to his wife. He eyed up Max's phone, "but can't you meet me in the middle and at least change the song?"

"Fine," Lucas smiled, pressing next on Max's phone.

Everyone apart from Mike all burst out laughing as *Papa Don't Preach* began playing.

"Oh the irony!" Dustin said shaking with laughter, wiping at his eyes where tears of hilarity had appeared.

Mike had a stony look on his face which only slowly turned into a smile when El grabbed his hands and made him dance with her. Lucas kindly skipped to the next song which was *What a Feeling* from *Flashdance*, Dustin of course doing his best dance moves like he was in the movie.

Mike took the shot offered to him by Will and downed it quickly, the burning sensation making him cringe. He sighed, giving into the night and trying to just forget everything else.

"You are so dead!" Ivy shouted, unable to stop her giggling amid her breathlessness as Ryan darted around the tree that held up the old tree house. He was laughing so hard, his laughter making Ivy grin as she ran in the opposite direction to catch up with him.

Ryan paused, confused where Ivy was when she finally attacked, jumping onto his back and cackling with glee. He grabbed her legs to secure her in a piggy back and started spinning around, making her scream with laughter.

"Stop!" she called, smiling ear to ear, her whole being happier than she had ever felt before. Being silly with Ryan was her favourite

thing in the whole world. It always had been.

Ryan stumbled slightly and grinned, looking over his shoulder at Ivy. "Okay maybe *I'm* getting dizzy now."

Ivy hummed with laughter as Ryan carried her over to the swing set, only lurching slightly as he lowered her onto the seat. She grabbed the cold metal handles and adjusted herself, making sure her dress was sitting right.

She yelped suddenly when the seat was pulled backwards as Ryan started to push her. She wasn't expecting it and tried to hide her blush, thankful that he couldn't see her face as he continued to push her forward, the breeze helping ease the heat that had crept into her skin.

They were silent for a while listening to the distant music in the kitchen and just enjoying the ambience of the garden. It looked so magical with the twinkling lights and the dancing flames in the fire pit. Ivy smiled to herself and took a deep breath, inhaling the distinct smell of summer.

"Are you scared about senior year?" Ryan asked, his quiet and gentle voice breaking through the silence.

Ivy didn't speak immediately, thinking hard about Ryan's question as he carried on pushing her. The breeze rippled through her hair as she swung back and forth and finally responded.

"A little bit," she admitted steadyng her breath. "It's just a lot of change. The thought of college and if I'm even going to get in." Ivy closed her eyes for a moment and exhaled a short laugh. "I don't know, I just think change scares me."

"No, I get it." Ryan said reasonably. "I'm scared too. Like what if I'm making a mistake by wanting to go straight into work? Should I be going to college instead? Is it okay if I don't *want* to go to college?"

"Of course it is!" Ivy exclaimed passionately, defending Ryan against his own thoughts. She looked over her shoulder at him. "It doesn't make me better or worse than you if I go to college and you don't."

Just think, you won't be stuck with a load of debt!"

"That's true," Ryan chuckled, slowing Ivy's swing down slightly. "I just want to make my folks happy..." He cleared his throat and stopped swinging Ivy, but kept his palms wrapped on the chains, lowering his chocolate brown eyes to the floor.

Ivy turned as much as she could to look at Ryan, "you're amazing, you don't have to worry about making your parents *proud*. They're already proud of you Ry."

Ryan slowly raised his gaze, his eyes capturing Ivy's. There was an intensity in the way he looked at her, it made Ivy feel like she had been electrocuted. Every atom in her body suddenly alive and taking notice. Goose bumps raised on her arms and her heart beat felt so loud she could hear it thumping in her ears. It was almost so loud she could barely hear *Flashdance* playing from the kitchen.

"You know...not all change is bad," Ryan said, his voice heavy, his eyes not leaving Ivy's.

"Y-Yeah..." Ivy responded, nodding her head, her lips slightly parted as she stared back at Ryan. "Some change is...um...cool."

"Cool." Ryan agreed nervously, repeating her words.

There was something in the air, Ivy could feel it and she was positive Ryan had to feel it too. Was it electricity? Was it magic? Ivy wasn't sure. All she knew was that this moment with Ryan was *right* and she wanted more. Her heart, her mind, her whole *body* whispered to her, to not be afraid, to let the moment happen.

"Ivy..." Ryan whispered, his back arching so he could get closer to her, his eyes locked on her eyes but his face almost in touching distance.

"Yes?" Ivy practically breathed out, her voice hushed, her heart daring to burst straight out of her chest. She couldn't take the suspense, either he needed to kiss her *right now* or she was going to kiss him.

He was so close. This was it. She could feel his lingering breath on

her skin. Ivy's eyes went to slowly shut when –

"OW!" Ryan shouted, jumping back and rubbing his forehead as he winced.

Ivy tried to shake herself out of the moment, looking from Ryan to the screwed-up ball of paper that had just hit him in the head and was now resting on the floor. It took only a few seconds for Ivy to add two and two together as she turned her now venomous glare onto James's bedroom window. Just as she suspected.

Her brothers, Sam and Zach were all scrambling to get back into the bedroom, all of them leaning out of the window. Zach was holding what looked like a sling shot and Sam was very loudly exclaiming, "code red! They've seen us!"

Ivy slowly stood up from the swing, her body which only a moment ago was filled with butterflies was now bubbling with anger. "I'm going to kill them," she whispered through her clenched teeth.

"Not if I don't kill them first," Ryan muttered, still rubbing at his sore forehead.

They didn't have time to wonder what had just happened between them, or more importantly, what was *about* to happen. No, they were in a war now. There was no thinking, only action.

"Let's go," Ivy said, her fists clenched as she ran towards the house, Ryan by her side.

"Shit! Shit! Shit!" Sam yelled as he tried to crawl under James's bed. "Oh my god it *stinks* under here!" he added, throwing a sock out from the bed base and army crawling until he was out of sight.

"Where do I go?!" Ben shouted, looking left and right in a panic while James and Zach, the true culprits of the crime scrambled out of the bedroom for better hiding spaces.

"Get under here!" Sam called, gesturing urgently to Ben who dropped to his knees and shimmied his way under the bed. "Ew it's gross under here," he said moving a stale hoodie out of the way.

"That's your brother for you," Sam whispered before sealing his mouth closed with his hand and doing the same to Ben when the sound of multiple footsteps could be heard on the stairs.

"James I'm going to kill you!" Ivy shouted in a thunderous voice.

"Oh my god," Sam winced. "I only *joked* about her being Thor, but she could totally do it."

Ben tried to hold in his sniggers which was helped by Sam's hand clasped over his mouth. They stayed as silent as they could, watching Ivy and Ryan's feet as they checked James's closet. Everything went quiet after a while and Sam slowly lowered his hand from Ben's mouth.

"I think the coast is cl – AH!"

"Gotcha!" Ivy said triumphantly, grabbing onto Sam's leg and with the help of Ryan they started to tug him out from under the bed.

"Okay, okay stop!" Sam whined, pulling his leg free. "I don't want carpet burn."

The boys willing crawled back out and collapsed onto the floor, looking up at Ivy and Ryan who were standing over them. Sam saw the mark on Ryan's forehead and tried his best not to smile, his lips struggling for a moment as he tried to feign innocence.

"It wasn't us I swear!" he begged, holding his hands up in surrender, Ben copying him to do the same movement.

"Oh, we know it was the other two," Ryan said wisely. "Where are they?"

"They ran out, we don't know where." Ben said doing the innocent eyes act which made Ivy roll hers.

She turned her attention to Ryan and exhaled a deep breath. "There's only so many places they can be, come on."

"Oh man this is so uncomfortable," Zach groaned, pulling out a shoe

from behind his back.

"Shush," James whispered, putting a finger to his mouth and trying but failing to also get comfortable in Ivy's closet. They had hidden behind the dresses, hoping that they were long enough to hide the two teenagers.

Zach sniggered, unable to stop himself. James gave him a warning glare and he cleared his throat, trying to stay quiet but smiling. "I'm sorry, but did you *see* the look on his face when the paper made contact!"

James grinned, taking a deep breath as he tried not to laugh, his body shuddering with silent fits of hysterics. They stayed silent for as long as they could, especially when they could hear Ryan and Ivy rumbling up the stairs.

They heard Ryan and Ivy talking to Sam and Ben, their voices murmured before they wandered off again, probably into one of the other bedrooms to continue the search.

James cringed and looked at Zach, "dude did you just fart?"

Zach smirked, his eyes twinkling with mischief. "Maybe..."

James sighed, "well at least it's in Ivy's closet and not mine."

Zach snorted with laughter, "what like your room smells of roses or something?"

Before James could argue back, the door to the closet was flung open as if by itself and the boys were suddenly jostled out, flying straight out of the closet and landing on Ivy's bed in a matter of seconds.

"Jesus!" James yelled, rubbing at his neck wishing he could have reacted in time with his own powers.

"Woah! That was *awesome!*" Zach shouted, propping himself up on his elbows and turning to look at Ivy and Ryan who were stood next to one another with their arms crossed, blazon looks on their faces.

"Oh you won't think it's awesome when we're done with you!" Ryan

warned holding up a pillow.

Zach looked to James wondering what they do next as the older teenagers slowly closed in on them.

James bit his lip, trying to think quickly as his eyes flickered around Ivy's room. He swung his arm out and Ivy and Ryan were completely ambushed by Ivy's old soft toys, all of them flinging one after the other from the closet. They shouted in surprise, their arms trying to bat away the teddy bears.

"Run!" James shouted to Zach, both of them scrambling off the bed and narrowly missing being grabbed by Ryan. They practically flew down the staircase, Sam and Ben hurrying from James's room to join them.

"They're coming!" Sam yelled, pushing the boys on the stairs so they would move faster. The volume of the music from the kitchen practically deafening them all as they ran into the living room.

For one second James imagined it had been quite peaceful for Lily and Grace, who were lying on the sofa eating chips, watching E! until they were completely bombarded by the boys, grabbing pillows off the sofa and armchair much to the twins shouts of protest.

Ivy and Ryan came charging into the room, pillows in their hands as the fight began. The twins initially moved back but soon joined the older teens side.

"Traitors!" James shouted to his cousins as Lily smacked him in the side with a cushion.

"Here's for ruining the Kardashians!" Grace yelled, aiming her cushion at Sam's ass. He yelped and fell onto the now bare sofa.

James narrowly escaped a pillow thrown his way by Ivy but Zach didn't duck in time for the blow to the side he received from one of the cushions, his older brother cheering in victory.

"You think you can hit me and get away with it?!"

"No," Zach shouted, furniture hopping to the other side of the living

room. "But the look on your face when the paper hit was *priceless*!"

Sam, James and Ben laughed at Zach's words and even Ivy had to struggle not to laugh.

"Hey!" Ryan called in shock to his best friend, "you're not allowed to laugh at this!"

"What happened?!" Grace asked in between throwing a cushion back in James's direction.

"I used the wrist rocket to hit Ryan in the forehead with paper!" Zach said to another round of laughter as he got pummelled once more by his brother, the pillows close to bursting.

"What the hell is the wrist rocket?" Lily shouted over all of the mayhem.

"It's a sling shot!" James replied, launching cushion after cushion at Ivy who blocked them with one of the bigger pillows from the arm chair.

"Oh my god!" Lily giggled, holding her hand to her mouth.

Ryan rolled his eyes, "it was not *that* funny."

"It was kind of funny," Ivy admitted to the shock of the room. "Now that I've had time to process it." The glint in her amber eyes made it obvious she was trying to tease her best friend, her grin widening at the look on his face.

Ryan stopped throwing pillows, in fact the whole room was suddenly still. Except for a few "oohs" from the boys, knowing that something was about to go down.

"Oh you think it was funny?" Ryan asked, stepping closer to Ivy, his eyes narrowing.

"Uh huh," Ivy grinned, also closing the gap. She had to raise her chin to look Ryan straight in the eye, the playful energy whizzed between them like sparks.

"Well then," Ryan whispered, trying his best to sound menacing. "If you wanna laugh, we can make you laugh." He grabbed Ivy around the middle and spun her around, she squealed as Ryan threw her onto the sofa and then yelled "tickle her!"

Ivy shrieked as she was overcome with laughter, Ryan tickling her side as she squirmed, Ben tickling her toes with James, the twins getting her arms, while Sam and Zach tickled her under her chin.

Utter madness ensued, tickle wars, arm wrestlers, floor like lava for the sake of Ben who still thought it was kind of cool, obstacle courses and eating competitions. By midnight the teens and Ben all lay on the floor, pillows scattered everywhere as they all looked up at the ceiling catching their breath and in the case of Sam and Zach, rubbing their full stomachs following their marshmallow competition.

The noise from the kitchen seemed to get louder all of a sudden, Ryan lifting his head to see the door had been opened and coming their way was all of their parents, one after the other, holding on to each other as they all sang.

"Come on kids!" yelled Dustin, beaming ear to ear. "We're doing the conga through the house!"

The teenagers all looked at each other, slightly bemused by their parent's behaviour until they smelt the very obvious stench of alcohol coming off some of them as they danced.

"Yes! Join us young ones as we conga into the night!" Will shouted in a mystical voice making the twins giggle in confusion. It was very strange to see Will drunk.

"Oh what the hell," Ryan couldn't help but laugh, looking at the rest of the kids. "Come on," he said ushering them up, knowing that they wouldn't have much of a choice.

Ivy laughed as she joined her mom at the end of the conga, Ryan standing behind her and hesitantly placing his palms on her waist for the second time that evening. He couldn't stop the way his heart raced when he felt the curve of her body within his hold. He was almost thankful for Grace who stood behind him holding onto his

hoodie, she didn't know it but she was practically keeping him from falling.

Dustin cheered from where he led the conga line, singing along to the music blasting from the kitchen, most of the adults knowing the words and joining in.

"Dance that conga 'til you drop! We're never gonna stop, you better hang on tight, so everybody! Do, do, do, come and do the conga! Choo, choo, choo, like a train across the floor!"

Ivy laughed, the sound of her laughter like a warm summer breeze hit Ryan straight in the chest. He couldn't stop smiling, his eyes on the back of her head, watching the way her hair swayed, especially when the conga line ended up in the garden.

"This is *madness!*" Ivy shouted to Ryan, turning to look at him over her shoulder. The music, the drunk singing of their parents, it all just drifted away. All he could see was her smile, the light in her eyes, the happiness that sparkled across her skin.

"But it feels like home to me," he told her, his eyes never leaving her as reality struck him so strongly that he felt like he could have been struck by lightning.

I'm in love with her.

Oh shit.

Notes for the Chapter:

AN: This chapter was fun to write from start to finish! I based the madness on party fun with my own siblings and family growing up 😂 And I've been putting in a few D&D nods, not just because of the very obvious reasons, but because I have been playing it online with my boyfriend, sister and brother in law and it's been so cool 😊

Please let me know what you thought of this crazy night! And thank you so much for reading 🐱 x

3. The First Day of Summer

The Life We Deserve

AN: Hi you guys! I hope everyone is having a lovely Sunday :-) I'm back to work tomorrow, so I need to have a mad rush around the house to make sure I've got clean uniform! Ahh!

I was hoping to get Chapter 3 out yesterday, but it turned out longer than I expected when writing it, which I guess isn't a bad thing!

One of my reviewers has asked for a bit of a forward to this chapter, just to clarify whose children are whose and their ages at the beginning of the story (June 2013). So if you already know, just skip this section. If not, take a little gander :-) But either way, enjoy Chapter 3!

Mike and El

Ivy Jane Wheeler (17) **Her name is in honour of the Ives family and El.**

James Michael Wheeler (13) **Named after James 'Jim' Hopper and Mike.**

Benjamin Edward Wheeler (10) **Named after Benny and Ted.**

Lucas and Max

Ryan Sinclair (17)

Zachary Sinclair (13)

Dustin and Laura

Samuel Henderson (13)

Will and Jen

Lily Joyce Byers (15) **Need I explain her middle name?**

Grace Katherine Byers (15) **Katherine is Jen's mother's name.**

Jonathan and Nancy

Jessica Byers (19)

Emily Byers (16)

Steve and Robin

Tyler Harrington (16)

Chloe Harrington (13)

Chapter 3 - The First day of Summer

El's eyelids twitched rapidly as she slept, her approaching nightmare sweeping through her dream like a thick and rapid black fog. The ordinary dream she had been having of her family was extinguished, Mike and their children disappearing out of view until it was just El.

Her feet were cold and wet and as she slowly looked down at her body she realised she was in the void. She was younger, *much* younger. Her shaky hand moved over her shaved head and she gasped, her lungs trying to fill with air as her breathing amplified.

It was pitch black, but she knew she was being watched. She could feel eyes on her, that deep feeling of dread. Fear prickled at her skin and she ran.

El opened her eyes, her heart pounding in her chest, her whole-body alert as she looked around in panic, praying that she was back in her bed. In her *home*.

"You okay honey?" came the muffled voice of Mike beside her, and just like falling into a warm bubble bath El immediately relaxed. She exhaled a shaky breath, smiling sheepishly in relief that it was just a nightmare.

She turned on her side to face Mike. He was half concealed by their bedding, his hair a shocking mess and his eyes still closed as he reached for El. She let him pull her closer, resting her head under his chin and holding him tighter, her eyes closing with the peace she felt as he left soft kisses in her hair.

El fell into a dreamless sleep, thankful that when she awoke again she was more refreshed and a lot calmer. The nightmare practically forgotten.

She pulled back slightly from Mike to reach for her phone and check the time. Eggo was already sat by her side of the bed, her tail wagging as she leaned in towards El, taking advantage of the close proximity to give her mom a lick.

El chuckled and wiped her face with her cotton sleeve. "Good morning baby," she whispered, stroking Eggo.

"Morning beautiful," Mike yawned in a groggy voice, assuming El was talking about him. His wife smiled to herself and thought it was best not to correct him.

"I feel like death," Mike coughed, pulling the covers further up his body so that they were bundled under his chin.

El couldn't help but laugh softly at her husband, he looked adorable in his miserable state. She reached over and stroked his hair. "Are you hungover honey?" she asked him in her motherly tone that was usually reserved for their children.

"No," he whined, flinching and hiding under the blanket when El opened the drapes. "Maybe," he added in a sorrowful mumble from the comforter.

El smirked with amusement but was kind enough to close the drapes. She walked to Mike's side of the bed and rubbed his back, waiting for him to emerge from the covers before she stroked his hair, giving him a loving smile as she looked into his dark tired eyes.

"Do you want me to make you a coffee and get you some breakfast?"

"Do you mind?"

El grinned, shaking her head, "of course not, otherwise I wouldn't have asked."

Mike smiled, his eyes filled with gratitude as he pulled El down enough to kiss her. "I love you," he whispered against her lips, making her own grin widen. She looked at him, her eyes sparkling.

"And I love you."

Almost thirty years of saying those words and El knew they would never grow old. She meant them just as much as the first time she told Mike she loved him. The love had grown and matured but it was still just as pure. It would always be magical no matter what.

"Now get some sleep honey," El whispered, kissing Mike's warm forehead as he sighed and readjusted his head on the pillow.

"Thanks babe," he smiled groggily, watching El leave the room with Eggo who was getting excited at the prospect of going outside. El gave her husband a small wave and a beautiful grin before slowly closing the bedroom door.

El looked down at her phone and wasn't surprised that the house was silent at 8am on a Saturday morning, especially after the party last night. El walked as quietly through the landing and down the stairs as she could, her face frowning in confusion when she saw her living room was covered in pillows. She shook her head and sighed, heading into the kitchen which also looked like a bomb had hit it.

Eggo ran to the French doors, whining to go out, impatiently pacing as El opened the doors for her and watched the Labrador spring into the garden, happily running around and doing her business. El laughed and turned to look at her kitchen.

The first thing on her agenda was the coffee machine, once it was turned on she set about clearing up the mess, occasionally smiling to herself as the memories of the night were triggered by picking up a *Cards Against Humanity* card, putting away the *Twister* game that Dustin had insisted they played at midnight and clearing away the alcohol, especially the now empty Vodka bottle. El sighed, knowing where Mike's hangover had come from.

Thinking the kitchen was a little too quiet El turned to look at the flat screen tv, tilting her head casually to the side and back as the screen turned on. She narrowed her eyes to control the volume, bringing it down slightly, not wanting to wake anyone else in the house.

El was loading the dishwasher when the news made her ears prick. She slowly turned to look at the television as a presenter walked through downtown Hawkins.

"It's been almost thirty years since this small town, Hawkins, Indiana was first pulled into the spotlight when Hawkins Middle School student Will Byers mysteriously went missing, followed on by the tragic deaths of Benny Hammond, Barbara Holland and Bob Newby, all shrouded in mystery and rumoured government conspiracies."

El suddenly felt like her skin was too tight, like she could no longer fit inside of her own body. She felt trapped and on edge, but she couldn't look away from the news report. A photo of Barb was flashed across the screen and El flinched, seeing her rotting corpse in her mind. The photo was replaced with one of Bob and then Benny. El could feel the hairs on the back of her neck standing up as she ripped her gaze away from the screen, holding onto the counter top for support.

"Numerous sources in 1983 to 1984 confirmed seeing a strange young girl around Hawkins. Gossip spread around the small town about her being a Russian spy, others believed she was of alien descent with supernatural powers. A thirty-year-old report from a Bradley's Big Buy employee had even stated that a girl matching the same description had shattered the window of the store with her mind. Could it be possible thirty years later that this same girl could still be in Hawkins?"

El jumped as her phone beeped, her hand frantically reaching for it where she had left it on the kitchen island. She knew who it would be from before seeing the message displayed.

Will: I know it's early, but are you watching the news? The twins woke me up to show me.

El: I'm watching it now. Why can't they just leave it alone?

Will: At least they haven't done as much digging as the ten-year anniversary report. Do you remember that one?

El sighed, running her hand through her hair before typing out a response.

El: Of course. But back then we had dad on the case, and Dr Owens and Murray to support us.

Will: We still have dad and mom. You know they will fight whatever news articles come out, even if dad isn't the Chief anymore, he's still got contacts. And you know he would die before he let anything happen to you or the kids.

El: That's what worries me.

"Mom?"

El jumped, dropping her phone on the floor in her alarm. She looked up with wide and scared eyes, meeting her daughter's gaze, Mike's amber eyes staring back at her, holding the same strength as her father.

"Are you okay?" Ivy asked, her beautiful face set into a deep frown of concern as she looked at her mom.

"Y-Yeah!" El laughed light-heartedly reaching for her phone and trying to smile. "I'm, um...just a bit jumpy today."

"Oh," Ivy said nodding in understanding as she headed to the fridge. "Are you on your period or something? I always get jumpy on my period. Wait..." Ivy paused, turning to look at her mom. "Do you even get periods now?"

El rolled her eyes but couldn't help but be thankful for the distraction. The news had mercifully moved onto their next article. "I haven't started menopause if that's what you're asking."

"Wait so you could get pregnant?" Ivy asked with almost a suspicious look in her eyes. "Please don't tell me you're giving me another sibling."

El laughed, handing Ivy a glass for the orange juice she had just pulled out of the fridge. "No, I'm not giving you another sibling. Even though I'm sure your dad would love that," she said with a sigh, moving over to the coffee machine. El couldn't help but smile softly as she added "your dad hates that you're all growing up."

"Don't I know it," Ivy mumbled as she lifted herself onto one of the stools against the island counter.

"Aw give him some slack honey," El smiled, looking back at her daughter for a moment before getting two mugs out of the cupboard. "You're still mine and you dad's baby girl, it can be hard to accept that you're all grown up. You'll understand when you're a mom one day."

"But does he have to be so *overprotective-dad* about it?! I love him, of course I do. But he's such a cliché mom."

El couldn't help but laugh as she poured a dash of milk into her coffee and added a sweetener. "I know honey and I promise I will have a word with him. But can you just understand where he is coming from, okay? He loves you so much. You are our first born and our only daughter. It's our prerogative to worry about you *and* embarrass you. Just know that we aren't coming from a bad place. We make mistakes too, and we are learning how to be parents every day."

Ivy smiled as she picked up her orange juice to take a sip. "You should write a book mom."

"Maybe I will," El grinned, putting the milk away. There was the sound of soft footsteps as Ben descended the stairs, his hair just as messy as Mike's as he yawned and rubbed at his eyes.

"Good morning sweetheart," El called to her youngest son as he made his way to the fridge, his bare feet scuffing slightly against the wood flooring.

"No, it's not morning yet," he replied in a drowsy tone, his eyes blinking blearily as he took a glass and filled it with ice from the machine. "I just wanted a drink and then I'm going back to bed."

El shook her head in amusement before raising her eyebrows as a thought came to her. "Well if you're going back up honey, do you mind taking this coffee to your dad?"

Ben looked grumpy for a moment, as if he couldn't believe he was being asked such a thing. He pouted slightly but took the mug out of El's grasp.

"Thank you honey," his mother said in a sing-song voice as she started to pull out ingredients. "I'm making pancakes for breakfast, I'll bring them up to you when they're done."

"Thank you mom." Ben responded with a tired smile, his initial annoyance at being set a chore leaving his young face as he headed back up the stairs. Eggo hearing the youngest Wheeler's voice came running into the house, making Ben spill a little bit of Mike's coffee as he carried on climbing, now with their dog by his side.

Ivy stared down at her phone, her elbow against the cold marble kitchen island as she leaned over her smart device, her fingers flicking through her Instagram feed.

Lisa: Have you asked your mom about the party yet? 🤔 And you still haven't told me how last night went!

Ivy's gaze subtly moved to her mom for a moment before looking down at her phone, picking it up to type a response to her best friend.

Ivy: No, I haven't asked her yet. And how about we meet for lunch? I can tell you all about last night! 🤪

Lisa: Well you're going to have to tell her soon! The party is tomorrow! And yes, I'm totally down for a lunch date. Can we invite lover boy? 😊

Ivy rolled her eyes, exhaling an exasperated sigh as she hurried to respond.

Ivy: How can I tell you about last night if Ryan is having lunch with us? 🤪

Lisa: Easy! Tell him we're having lunch at 1pm, but we'll get there for 12. Will an hour be enough to tell me the gossip?! 😊

Ivy: Yeah I think so.

Lisa: Awesome 😊 Benny's at 12?

Ivy: Sounds like a plan! 🎉

"Want to help me with the pancakes?" El asked from the pantry, her arms wrapped around the flour and sugar packets.

Ivy looked up from her phone to her mom and the teenage angst inside of her wanted to groan and say no. But when she thought about the fact that she was going to have to ask her mom's permission to go to the party, she thought better of complaining.

"Yeah," Ivy responded with as much enthusiasm as she could as she put her phone back down on the counter. "Sure mom."

She couldn't deny that she really did enjoy spending time with her mom. She loved it when they put on facemasks together, watched E! or movies that the guys in the house hated, like Twilight and just had a good gossip over the latest celebrity news.

Ivy mixed the forming pancake batter as El added ingredients into the bowl. The teenager carried on whisking but couldn't deny that her stomach twisted slightly with nerves as she tried to think of the best way to broach the topic of the party. She knew it would come as a surprise to her mom, especially because this would be Ivy's first teenage party that didn't involve a birthday or her family being around.

"Mom?" Ivy asked, her voice wavering slightly with nerves as she kept her eyes on the batter.

"Yes honey?" El asked as she started chopping up strawberries next to her daughter.

Ivy opened her mouth and closed it, shuffling from one foot to the other before turning to look at her mom. "Um...me and Lisa have been invited to a party tomorrow night at Kimberley Kelly's place.

You know, an end of the school year type of thing? And I um, I just wanted to ask if I can go."

El stood chopping fruit and turned her attention onto Ivy, her eyebrows raising in surprise at her daughter's words, just as she had thought they would. But what was a surprise was the smile that formed on her mom's lips.

"Of course you can go to the party honey."

"Really?" Ivy asked in amazement, completely shocked that she hadn't had to talk her mom around.

"Of course!" El chuckled, going back to slicing the strawberries and putting them in a separate bowl. "You're seventeen honey and it's the summer. I want you to have fun with your friends." She paused and looked back at Ivy, "*responsible* fun of course. No more than one alcoholic drink if you must have one, *definitely* no drugs and be safe, okay?"

Ivy grinned, dipping her head slightly as her cheeks blushed. "I know mom. And I promise I'm not going to do any drugs, or anything crazy like that."

"I know you wouldn't honey," El sighed, reaching out to cup Ivy's cheek making her daughter raise her head to capture her mom's gaze. "I trust you. And you know if the party isn't for you, or something happens and you want to come home, I'll be right here waiting for your call."

"Thanks mom," Ivy smiled, feeling thankful that she was able to talk to her mother about these things and that she didn't have to come up with a lie. In Ivy's opinion respect worked both ways, her parents had respect for her and she had respect for them.

"No problem," El grinned, turning back to the counter and preparing more fillings while Ivy looked for a frying pan. "Are you going to see if Ryan wants to come to the party?" she added, making her daughter almost drop the pan she had just pulled out of the cupboard.

Ivy steadied the pan on the stove before turning back to look at her

mom. "Yeah I was going to ask him at lunch today. Me and Lisa are going to go to Benny's for lunch and we thought he could join us."

"Sounds fun," El responded as she washed her hands and smiled at her daughter. "Do you want me to drive you girls to Benny's? I wanted to go and see your grandpa and nana today anyway."

"Yeah that would be great, thank you mom!" Ivy said, unable to take the smile off her face as she thought about seeing Ryan again. She blushed thinking about how intimate things had become between them last night on the swing. But in all of the craziness of the party and the racing of her heart, she couldn't think clearly about what aspects of that private moment were fact or fiction. Had he leaned in closer or was she just imagining it? Had he wanted to kiss her, or was it just one sided?

Ivy tried not to let it confuse her as she got the plates out of the cabinet, her mom pouring batter into the pan as the smell of sweet pancakes filled the air. She thought about Kim's party and wondered if the dim lighting, the charged atmosphere and music blaring all around them would create another intimate moment for her and Ryan. And maybe this time it wouldn't be interrupted.

A reminder like a red siren blared straight through Ivy's thoughts as she groaned, remembering a very obvious flaw to her plan. She turned to look at her mom and sighed, "what am I going to tell dad about the party?"

El glanced at Ivy over her shoulder from where she was flipping pancakes and smiled at her daughter, her eyes filled with humour. "Oh don't you worry. Leave your father to me."

The air was cool as it swirled through the open window brushing over Ryan's exposed arm which had flung out to the side in his sleep. His bed at home was much more spacious than the bunks that he and Zach used when they stayed at their grandparent's house in Hawkins.

Their parents stayed in their dad's old room and when Aunt Erica was home from Washington DC she stayed in her old bedroom. The guest room had been converted especially for the Sinclair's grandsons and

despite the bed getting a bit more cramped the more the boys grew, Ryan and Zach still loved the place.

It was the sound of a lawn mower that woke up Ryan, he grumbled as he moved his stretched-out arm over his face, hoping that would somehow shield some of the noise. He already knew who it would be, no doubt Ted Wheeler, Ivy's grandad trying to perfect his already pristine garden.

Ryan turned on his side, yawning as he reached for his phone on the bedside table. He scrambled for it, finally getting hold of the device and bringing it down to the bed. Zach was on the top bunk and from what Ryan could tell, his brother was still asleep.

He shuffled in the bed, the blanket tangled slightly from his sleep and the warmth that had crept onto his skin when he slept. Ryan kicked the blanket to the bottom of the bed and then turned over onto his front, propping his elbows into the mattress so that his phone was perched on the pillow.

He instinctively checked his social media without a second thought, it was practically built into him to do so. He cleared through some messages from the boys back in California and then hesitated as he went to type in Ivy's username.

He didn't tell *anyone* that this was how he always spent the first ten minutes of consciousness, scrolling through his best friend's Instagram page, his eyes fixating over her images, his heart pulsing faster as he smiled over the different looks on her face.

There were the goofy photos, like Ivy standing on Lissa's shoulders in the Hendersons' pool as they tried to be cheerleaders, the caption literally saying *Bring it On*. Ryan couldn't stop his eyes from staring at Ivy's body in a bikini, his skin prickling with heat and his throat drying. Her body had changed so much over the years, she had a woman's body now.

Ryan tried to clear his throat, but mostly his thoughts as he scrolled a bit more. Smiling again at Ivy's family photos, images of her and her mom holding a cake up for the camera that they had just baked, or a photo of her under a blanket with Ben, both of them watching

cartoons. The caption read *I love him really! #babybrother*

And then there were photos of the two of them, throwback Thursday images of their childhood spent together, making mud pies, playing with Ivy's dolls and building sandcastles. And the more recent photos, like the one where they both grinned ear to ear, sat side by side on the ski lift which was from their most recent joint family vacation.

Ryan sighed, moving onto the few photos that were just of Ivy, close up photos showing her beautiful face. He stared into her amber eyes and could feel the butterflies fluttering in his stomach. He had never seen a girl more attractive in his life. Ivy was flawlessly beautiful, she didn't even need to try and she *still* captured his heart and his eyes.

Ryan's finger hovered over the photo, slowly tracing Ivy's lips, his thoughts flickering back to the night before in the garden. He had wanted to kiss her more than anything, and he had been *so* close –

"Why are you staring at photos of Ivy?"

Ryan jumped up so violently from his brother's sudden voice, that he smacked his head on the underside of the bunk, cursing loudly as he crumbled back onto the mattress and held his head in his hands, wincing as he tried to block out Zach's sniggering.

His brother was leaning over the side of the bunk, clearly spying on Ryan who slowly lifted his throbbing head to glare at his little brother.

"I wasn't *staring* at photos of Ivy," Ryan whispered through clenched teeth, his head throbbing like a pulse.

Zach laughed, shaking his head in amusement. "You totally were! Man, you are such a *stalker*."

"Why don't you just fuck off out of my business," Ryan shouted, his body shaking with embarrassment that he tried to hide as rage. He got up from his bunk and yanked a shirt over his head.

Zach laughed, rolling back onto his mattress, a mischievous smirk. "And why don't you just fuck Iv – "

"Hey!" Their dad interrupted them, his voice serious as he looked at both of his sons. He was still holding onto the bedroom door from where he had just appeared, looking at them both sternly. "I don't know why you are both cursing, but this ends now. You know your grandparents hate it, and I hate hearing that language coming out of your mouths. Your mom is bad enough!"

"Sorry dad," the brothers mumbled in unison, both of them feeling ashamed. Their dad always had a way of speaking to them like this, he never really raised his voice, but his words always got through to them. Ryan wondered if it was his career in law enforcement that had given him that particular skill.

"Get yourselves dressed boys, breakfast is on the table," Lucas told his sons, his voice a lot calmer and his face more concerned at Zach and Ryan's fighting than the cursing itself. He left the room, leaving the brothers to glance at each other before grabbing their clothes.

Ryan was just about to follow Zach down the stairs when his phone beeped, moving his attention away from breakfast and onto a message from Ivy. He instantly felt breathless as he swiped to open the DM.

Ivy: Morning! Want to have lunch with me and Lisa? Benny's 1pm? 😊

Ryan exhaled a breath of nerves as he quickly responded, his smiling growing.

Ryan: The chance to have a Benny's triple decker burger?! ☺ And meet your mysterious best friend? I'm in 🙌 ☺

Ivy: Awesome 😊 See you later then. And let me take this moment to apologise for Lisa 😊

Ryan: 😊 She can't be that bad!

Ivy: Oh you'll see! 🎉 See you soon Ry 😊

Ryan: Can't wait 😊

He put his phone in his shorts pocket and ran a hand through his short hair, trying to contain himself and the foolish grin that was on

his face, he didn't want his family seeing him like this.

But no matter how Ryan tried, he couldn't stop smiling. Stuffing his mouth with breakfast foods while his family talked about the plans for the rest of their time in Hawkins. He listened as best as he could, even adding in a comment here or there, but there was only one thing on his mind. One person. And in just a few short hours, he was going to see her again.

Mike's peaceful lie-in had lasted approximately fifteen minutes before the bedroom was invaded by Ben and Eggo. His son had come in with a steaming cup of coffee and Eggo had launched herself straight onto the bed and immediately started licking Mike, he cringed and tried to back away from the dog, her warm slobbery tongue and her shedding hair. He was positive this was an actual embodiment of 'hair of the dog' considering Eggo's attack woke him much easier than any alcoholic drink could have done.

So when El came into the bedroom with a tray laden with pancakes, it was to find her husband, son and dog all snuggled up in their bed, watching *The Simpsons* on the flat screen which was mounted to the opposite wall.

Mike was holding his tablet, a deep frown etched into his brow as he scrolled through Ivy's Instagram page, his eyes narrowing anytime he came across a different boy's comment on her photos.

"I've brought you boys some pancakes," El smiled, placing the tray onto the bedside table and ushering Eggo off the bed so that she wouldn't steal the breakfast.

The idea of food turned Ben's attention from the television and his wide amber eyes took in the breakfast platter with adoration, he shuffled up the bed to sit against the headboard and waited impatiently for El to take her place on the bed and put the tray on Ben's knee as he was in the middle of his parents.

"They look great," Mike said putting down his tablet and smiling at El sheepishly. "Sorry for being totally useless this morning."

El laughed, cutting up the pancakes so that they could all dig in. "It's fine honey. Do you remember how hungover I was after my dad's 70th birthday last year?"

Mike grinned, his face creasing with amusement. "How can I forget!" He distinctively remembered holding El's hair back while she threw up in the bushes outside of the function room.

"It was Murray's fault for giving me that Russian Vodka," El chortled, smiling to herself as she clearly thought back to the party. Well, what she could remember of it at least.

Mike grinned, his eyes on the television screen for a moment as his thoughts wandered off. It was hard to believe that time could have passed so quickly. Murray had passed away a month after Hopper's 70th, and Dr Owens had gone five years earlier. Mike felt thankful that his parents and Hopper and Joyce were still around, but when he thought about it too much, it hurt to accept that they weren't getting any younger.

"Dad are you going to eat any of the pancakes?" Ben asked Mike, bringing him out of his daze as he blinked and turned to look at his son who was making his way through the breakfast, El's arm around him.

Mike smiled, reaching out to ruffle his son's light brown hair. "Just leave me a bit okay?"

Ben grinned, nodding in agreement before he tried to stuff almost a whole pancake in his mouth, getting syrup all over his face.

For a while they all remained cosy together, Ben tucked in between his parents, who leaned their heads against one another, occasionally eating small pieces of pancake or strawberries and laughing at *The Simpsons*.

"Right, you need to have a shower young man," El sighed, kissing the crown of Ben's head while he examined his sticky maple syrup fingers.

"Do I have to?" he whined, looking up at his mother. El tried to

contain her grin at the state of her son. He had chocolate spread around his nose, syrup on his cheeks and what looked like fluffy pancake remains on the edge of his mouth.

"Oh absolutely."

"Fine," Ben mumbled, shuffling off the bed and pressing his hands into the covers, El closed her eyes for a moment, knowing that the bedding would definitely need changing today.

El watched their youngest son trudge into the hallway and get a towel out of the airing cupboard. Once she could hear the bathroom door close and the sound of the faucet turning on, she felt content that Ben was in the shower.

She turned back to her husband, about to tell him something when she halted, her eyebrow rising as she noticed what Mike was looking at on his tablet.

"Why are you stalking our daughter's Instagram page?"

Mike jumped, his eyes startled as he turned to look at El and hesitantly put down his tablet. "I'm not! I just..." He sighed and picked the device back up, practically holding it out to his wife. "Okay I *am*. But have you seen what some of these punks have been writing in her comments?! I mean look at this one!"

El exhaled a weary breath and took the tablet out of Mike's hands, calmly scrolling down the screen until she could see the comment in question and read it outloud, "cool photo Ivy."

"See!"

El closed her eyes and whispered, "give me strength." She looked at her husband and tried desperately not to laugh, controlling her grin as he continued to point at the comment, his eyes wide and almost crazed.

"It's hardly 'take your shirt off Ivy'!"

Mike laughed bitterly, turning the tablet off. "Babe *this* is where it all begins!"

El sighed heavily, frustration starting to build inside of her for Mike to understand. "Honey," she began sternly, her eyes set with determination as she reached for his hand and squeezed it. Mike looked up at her, willing to listen. "Ivy is seventeen years old. You need to start accepting that she has *grown up*. You need to remember that we were her age once and we were *a lot* more difficult. She wants to go to college next year. We need to allow her time to find herself and become the amazing woman I know she is going to be. We need to let her be an adult and make her own mistakes."

There was silence for a moment as Mike tried to process what El was saying, he frowned, his eyes so sad that El could feel her heart aching for him.

"We had to grow up so fast," he eventually mumbled, his voice cracking slightly as he tried to keep a handle on his emotions. He looked up at El and there was such pain in those amber eyes. She knew he had more to say and so she let him, stroking his hand slowly and keeping his gaze.

"Through everything we had been through, through everything *you* had been through El. We were never *young*. Well not how we should have been. Trauma...it *ages* you. I just want our kids to have what we didn't have. I want them to be able to be kids as long as they can, because I don't want them to go through anything that is going to make them grow up overnight. I want *us* to be their protectors, I don't want them to have to fight like we did."

"I know honey," El whispered, her voice shaky and heavy with the emotion that pushed on her chest. She reached for Mike's face and he closed his eyes, leaning his cheek into her warm palm.

"But what you have got to remember is that our situation growing up couldn't be more different than theirs." El reasoned, her voice soft. "Yes, we had to grow up fast, but honey I *loved* growing up with *you*. It was something I never thought I would get to experience, it wasn't even something I comprehended until you found me."

Mike opened his eyes and stared at El. She smiled gently at him, her eyes brimming with tears. "But you gave me the life I deserved Mike. You gave me every experience I could have ever wished for. You gave

me love and you gave me a family, a *home*. And together we have tried to give our children everything we can. They *have* had full childhoods, they have had normality and that is beautiful. But do you know what is also normal? To be able to grow up. And honey Ivy is ready for that."

"You're right," Mike croaked, his Adam's apple bobbing as he cleared his thick throat. "I'm sorry. I always told myself that I would never be as overprotective of our children as Hopper was over you." He laughed, shaking his head in acceptance. "But I guess I am."

El grinned, her watery eyes lighting up. "You're never going to admit that to him, are you?"

"No," Mike snorted, his face brightening up as his smile stretched. It was almost like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders, El could practically see the burden that had left him.

"It's okay to be protective of our children, honey. I would be concerned if you weren't." El reassured her husband. "But we have to give them room to grow."

Mike breathed out a sharp breath and reached for El, "I'm sorry. I've been dumb. I've been a – "

"Mouth breather?"

"Yeah," Mike responded, grinning as he pulled his wife into his arms. "I promise I'll work on it, and just try and be a good dad."

El sighed, smiling into Mike's chest as she squeezed him tight. "Honey you already *are* an amazing dad, and we all love you."

"And I love you all so much," Mike exhaled in a soft voice, lying back on the bed with El, their limbs wrapped around one another as they stared into each other eyes, their noses touching.

For a while they just lay there, enjoying the peace. They heard James eventually getting up and stumbling down the stairs. They heard Ivy rushing into the bathroom the second Ben was out and complaining that he had soaked the floor. And they heard Eggo barking with excitement as their sons prepared to take her for a walk.

It was madness and it was home.

Mike looked unsettled after a while, like there was something right at the front of his mind that he couldn't shift. When El couldn't decipher his panicked looks, she eventually asked him what was wrong.

"Do we need to give Ivy...*the talk*?"

El smiled, her brow lowering in sympathy at Mike as she reached out to pat his cheek gently. "Oh babe," she sighed. "I gave her the talk years ago."

"Oh," Mike swallowed, trying to process this new information. His expression was a mixture of relief for not having to talk to his daughter about sex, but also something deeper, a question that was now stirring in his mind.

"So...has she?"

El shook her head, "no I don't believe so. She knows she can always come to me and tell me if it *does* happen. But don't worry, she is protected for when the time does come."

Mike nodded quietly and El smiled softly, knowing that the fact that he hadn't panicked at least externally over this was good progress. She couldn't help but feel mischievous and her grin widened.

"Although, maybe it is time that you have the talk with James."

Just as El knew he would be, Mike spluttered with horror and she couldn't help but laugh at him.

"Stop laughing!" he warned, his hand moving to her side where he knew she was ticklish.

She grinned, her fingers traveling slowly to the back of Mike's neck ready for battle. El raised her eyebrow at her husband, a smirk spreading on her face. "Make me."

El shrieked with laughter as Mike tickled her and he gasped as she got him on a sensitive part of his neck, they tumbled on the bed, both laughing and acting like children. They ended up bundled up in the

blanket together, like a burrito. El cuddled up to Mike, his arms wrapped around her as he kissed her cheek, making her grin only grow.

"What time is it?" she asked after a while, yawning slightly. "I'm going to drop Ivy off at Benny's. She's having lunch with Lisa and Ryan."

"Oh?" Mike asked as El reached over for her phone to see what the time was. Mike took the opportunity to reach for his water.

"And then I thought I would drop in on my dad."

"Sounds good," Mike said as he sipped at his water. He smiled against the glass, "anything else I need to know?"

El turned to look at him as he took a gulp of water. "Oh yeah, just one thing..." she bit her lip trying to contain her grin. "Ivy's going to a high school party tomorrow night. And she's taking Ryan."

Mike choked.

Music filled the car as El drove Ivy and Lisa to Benny's. They had opened the windows to allow in the summer breeze which cooled their skin and rustled their hair as they all sang.

"If I could fall into the sky, do you think time would pass me by?
Cause you know I'd walk a thousand miles if I could just see you tonight."

Ivy and Lisa twiddled their fingers like they were playing air pianos. The girls laughing and singing dramatically, "it's always times like these when I think of you and I wonder if you ever think of me. Cause everything's so wrong and I don't belong, living in your precious memory!"

El smiled to herself as she indicated right, the tyres of the car collecting dust on the older country roads. She looked around at the fields, they were bright yellow and vivid green. It was truly beautiful, but nothing compared to the sound of her children laughing and just having *fun*.

She joined in singing with Ivy and Lisa where she knew the words and hummed the rest of the song, just content to be where she was in her life with the people she loved the most.

El could see Benny's coming up and she sighed, thankful that Benny's brother Eddie had kept the diner going over the years, only recently retiring and giving the business to his daughter Ali.

There would always be that gut feeling of pain anytime El got close to the diner, after all some memories could never fade. But for the most part she was able to enjoy the food and remember the good times that she had at Benny's over the years. The burgers after school with the party, the shakes on the weekend with Mike or Max, and later on the meals with the kids. They had had good times at the diner and that was what El tried to cling onto.

She parked up outside of the diner which was already bustling with people, only a few booths appearing to be empty.

"Have fun girls," El said to Ivy and Lisa as she turned in her seat. "Tell Ryan I said hi, and get a burger on me," she added, handing a few bills over to her daughter.

"Aw thanks mom!" Ivy thanked El with gratitude, tucking the money into her purse. "Where should we meet you afterwards?"

"I'll be at your grandpa and nana's, but if you want me to pick you up here, just text me okay?"

"Okay," Ivy said, leaning forward to kiss her mom on the cheek. "Thanks again."

"Yeah thank you Mrs Wheeler," Lisa smiled politely, opening the car door.

El laughed, "Lisa you know you can call me El. Mrs Wheeler makes me think of my mother in law."

"Okay...*El*." Lisa grinned, her smile a little bashful as she clambered out of the car. Ivy met her on the other side.

El waved to the girls, watching them hurrying into Benny's to grab

the last booth before she put the car in reverse and started her journey to her second home.

The roads were so familiar that El knew she probably could have driven them with her eyes closed if necessary. She drove past the large and dominant houses of Loch Nora before passing more familiar territory like Maple Street. El made a mental note to speak to Nancy about plans for Karen's 70th birthday party in two weeks.

Nancy and Jonathan lived in New York, their oldest daughter Jessica had just completed her first year at college and Emily would be going into her junior year of high school. They were always missed, but El was thankful for the times that they did come back to the small town. Their next trip home would be for Karen's birthday and El looked forward to the whole family being back together again.

She focused on the road now that she was getting closer to the old Byers house, knowing that despite her dad's best efforts, the drive was still laden with potholes. The summer heat cracked the tarmac even more, making the surface uneven.

It got more bumpy once the terrain changed to gravel but El didn't mind, she was used to it. It was one of the many features that characterised her teenage home.

El pulled up next to Hopper's truck and locked her SUV before heading up the worn steps. They creaked slightly under her weight but she didn't pay them no mind, opening the front door and calling into the house, "hi!"

There was movement from the kitchen and Joyce appeared, her eyes having that same motherly sparkle from the first time El had met Joyce, no matter how her hair had greyed or her skin had aged, her character remained. Strong, loving and fierce.

"Oh sweetheart!" Joyce sang, her arms opening to El who hugged her step mom tightly. "It's so good to see you. Happy vacation time! Is it good to be off work?"

El smiled, eventually pulling back from Joyce. "It definitely feels good. You never get used to being paid for lounging at home and

sleeping in."

Joyce chuckled, the women both moving to the kitchen. "If you ask me, I miss work."

"You'd still be working at Melvard's now, if it was still open." El sighed leaning against the cold counter.

Joyce smiled sadly, pulling a pitcher of lemonade out of the fridge. "Oh absolutely. I miss that place."

El nodded sympathetically. "I know. But you're still doing an occasional shift at the police station aren't you? Answering the calls?"

"Uh huh," Joyce said as she pulled out three glasses. "But your father would put an end to it if I allowed him. He thinks it tires me out. But don't worry, I corrected him. *He* tires me out! If it's not the garden he wants to work on, it's the porch. And I tell him to just do it then, but he just gets too lazy!"

El grinned in amusement, watching Joyce pour the lemonade. "Where is he anyway?"

"In the garden," Joyce sighed, shaking her head. "Chopping logs."

El rolled her eyes, "I told him we would bring him logs ready for winter. It's not like he needs them yet. It's only June!"

"I know," Joyce said wearily, shrugging her thin shoulders. "But you know what your dad is like. He still thinks he can do it himself. I guess he's starting early because it takes him longer nowadays."

"Well I'll go and have a word with him," El exhaled a frustrated breath.

"Here," Joyce said, handing El two glasses of lemonade. "See if he won't take a break and have a drink."

"Will do."

El carried out the glasses into the yard, carefully stepping down the back porch, the sound of the crutched ice clinking against the glass

making her even more thirsty.

She spotted Hopper immediately. He was on the edge of the back yard, axe in hand as he swung it back and then lunged it forward, slicing a log into two pieces.

"Hey!" El called to her dad, making her way over to him. He raised his head to look at her and awkwardly put down the axe.

"So what part of me saying that I'd get you the logs didn't you understand?" El asked Hopper, her eyebrow raised in annoyance as she handed him one of the glasses of lemonade.

"I didn't want to bother you," he said dismissively. "Plus I can do it myself El. I'm not *that* old yet."

El sighed shaking her head, "I wish you would look after yourself more. You're going to put your back out or something."

"Yeah okay," Hopper snorted, taking a gulp of his lemonade.

El watched him for a moment in exasperation before turning her attention onto the remaining logs. She narrowed her eyes, concentrated and instantly all the logs were cut neatly in half.

Hopper looked from the logs to his daughter and then back again. "You know that's cheating right?" He asked her casually as he finished off his lemonade.

El smiled, "I wouldn't call it cheating. I would call it delivering you the logs early."

"Smart ass," Hopper grumbled, his lips curved into a grin that even his grey beard couldn't hide.

"I learned from the best," El teased, pulling her tongue out and starting to walk towards the back yard porch swing.

"You're clearly talking about Wheeler and not your dear old dad."

"Oh of course," El responded with sarcasm. Her smile widening as Hopper joined her on the swing.

"So where are the kids today?" The retired chief asked as they swung quietly, El still sipping her drink.

"Ben is planning his D&D campaign, he's got his friends over tomorrow night. James is playing on his video games, Ivy is having lunch with Lisa and Ryan and Mike is recovering from a hangover."

Hopper grunted with amusement. "Wheeler...such a lightweight."

"Leave him alone," El laughed, hitting her dad on the arm. Hopper smiled but kept any further teasing of his son in law to himself.

"Did the Sinclair's get here alright?"

"Yeah," El beamed, looking ahead at the trees, her eyes glazed over slightly as the events of the evening came back to her once again. "They were all over at the house last night, Dustin, Laura, Will and Jen, and all the kids of course. It was a great night."

"Ah that explains Wheeler's hangover then."

"Exactly. And he was worrying over Ivy and Ryan so that didn't help matters."

Hopper shook his head, his gaze also on the trees. "Are those two dating?"

El poised her lips in thought, "I don't think so. But between you and me, I think it's only a matter of time."

Hopper exhaled a heavy breath, "well at least I'm prepared if it does happen." He glanced at El and smirked, "unlike you and Wheeler. I think it's fair to say I was *not* prepared for what you two had in store."

El gave her dad a bemused look, "and what do you mean by that?!"

Hopper hummed out a breath, trying to figure out how to word what he meant. "All that time in the cabin that you would talk about him, I suppose I just thought that because he was one of the only boys you knew at that point, that he was just a crush or something. But geez...when you guys were reunited? Let's just say it was the moment

I realised I was wrong not to trust him knowing where you were. I have never known a love like that so young."

El watched her dad for a moment, her heartbeat racing as she remembered those times so clearly. Seeing Mike in the void, crying desperately for him. Her anger at their separation, Mike's trauma and fury when he realised how close she had been all that time.

"It seems so long ago," El whispered, her eyes flickering to Mirkwood where it all began. "And yet anytime I think about it, it feels like it just happened. I feel like my life began when I met Mike. Before Mike feels like a nightmare. It doesn't seem *real*. My life after the lab has been so good that I think I've disassociated myself from the bad."

The branches of the trees moved softly in the breeze, carrying a beautiful rustling sound through the air. El sighed, her chest feeling heavy as she turned to look at Hopper, to find he was already watching her, concern in his eyes.

"I am so happy with my life. I just..."

"You just?"

"I don't know," El frowned, biting her lip. "I get scared. What if this is all a dream? What if I wake up in that place again?"

Hopper put his arm around El and she leaned into his chest, her eyes watering as she blinked rapidly to try and clear them of tears.

"It's not a dream honey," he promised her, his voice strong and deep. "Trust me, I get scared too. I know Joyce does, and I'm sure Mike does as well. And yes I know they still report things about Hawkins on the news every so often, and sometimes they are close to the truth. But El we are *never* going to let them discover you or the kids. You *are* safe."

El sniffled, clutching onto her dad, breathing in his scent and finding it just as comforting now as she did all those years back.

"I get so jumpy dad. Any sound can make me anxious. I get paranoid that people are staring at me, or watching me."

"Hey, it's okay," Hopper tried to reassure El, swinging them both in the calm of the garden. "You are smart and your kids are smart. I know things happen with the kids sometimes beyond your control, but just remember that I am here. You have got a whole team in Hawkins that will protect you all. We have contacts."

"That's true," El admitted, exhaling a shaky breath as she tried to calm herself down. Her dad's words worked like a tonic, easing her down from her panicked state.

Hopper sighed, squeezing El tighter and looking out towards Mirkwood, his eyes narrowed and his jaw set. "You are safe, kid. And I won't rest until you know it."

Ivy and Lisa weaved their way through the crowd of teenagers and regulars that always descended on Benny's Burgers. It was the place to eat in the summer, not just for the small town folk of Hawkins but for tourists. The burgers were award winning and the milkshakes in Ivy's opinion were the best she had ever tasted.

"I love this place!" Lisa shouted over the jukebox. "It's so retro. Ali definitely put it on the map."

Ivy smiled as she looked around at the photos on the wall. The framed photograph of Benny and Eddie Hammond smiling, shoulder to shoulder dominated the scene. But there was also strung lighting across the bar, a flatscreen tv in the corner for the regular customers who treated the diner more like a sports bar and an extension to the building that housed a pool table.

The older regulars of the diner loved the place for its history, while the teenagers loved the food and atmosphere. The only teenager who really took the time to smile at Benny's photo and be grateful that the place was still running after what had happened was Ivy. But maybe that was because she knew Benny's *real* story. The kind man who had just been trying to help a scared little girl and was murdered because of that kindness. It didn't surprise Ivy that her little brother was named after him.

Lisa and Ivy slid into a booth, both exhaling with relief that they had

been able to get the last one.

"So do you want to order drinks first or get straight to the gossip?" Lisa asked, wiggling her eyebrows.

Ivy smirked, playing with the ripped hem of her denim shorts. "I'm thinking drinks first."

"Stalling much?" Lisa teased making Ivy laugh.

"No! I just want a milkshake okay? Can you blame me for that?!"

"Not at Benny's," Lisa grinned just as a familiar figure came over to their booth.

"Good afternoon ladies, what can I get you?"

"Hi Tyler," Ivy and Lisa said in unison.

No one could make waitering cool like Tyler Harrington. Was it his slicked to the side hair? Was it that gleaming smile or the trendy clothes he always wore? Or was it just his confident stance or the way the teenage girls gathered at the diner just to have an excuse to stare at him?

He might be only 16, but he was still the coolest guy in high school. There was no one that didn't like Tyler Harrington. If it was because they had a major crush on him, wanted to be like him or just loved his confidence.

Luckily for Ivy she was used to Tyler. The Harrington's were family friends, Steve and Robin were always at major family events and that naturally included Tyler and his little sister Chloe.

"Can I get a regular chocolate shake please," Ivy said with a smile not even having to look at the menu.

"And can I get..." Lisa added, her eyes squinting slightly as she stared at the specials board. "A large Reese's pieces shake please."

"No problem ladies," Tyler grinned that trademark smile as he tucked his pencil behind his ear. "Want any food adding to that order?"

"Not just yet thanks Tyler," Ivy said politely. "We're waiting for Ryan."

Tyler's eyebrows raised in surprise and he smiled, "I didn't realise Ry was back in town! Maybe I'll join you when I'm on my break."

"You're more than welcome," Lisa smiled.

"It can be a double date then," Tyler winked at Lisa before retreating to behind the bar.

Ivy and Lisa looked at one another for a moment and both snorted with laughter.

"At what point do I tell him I'm gay?" Lisa asked, trying to contain her amusement.

"Probably before he tries to make a move!"

Lisa shrugged, "it's nice having a little attention. It's not like many people in our school are openly gay."

Ivy frowned in sympathy, smiling kindly at her best friend. "It will all be worth it when the right one comes along."

Lisa sighed, "well why can't the right one be Kimberley Kelly? She is gorgeous."

Ivy raised her eyebrow in mild surprise, "you like Kim?"

"Just a little bit," Lisa laughed trying to wave off Ivy's curiosity. "She's just kind of a rare breed you know? Cheerleader but actually really nice. Beautiful but not vain. Popular but not a jerk. How can I *not* like her?"

"I suppose," Ivy reasoned, leaning back against the cold material of the booth. "Well who knows what will happen at her party!"

"Yeah right," Lisa shook her head. "There's no way she is g - "

"And here's your shakes ladies," Tyler announced, interrupting their conversation as he placed the tall glasses in front of the girls.

"These look great," Lisa smiled, already pulling her milkshake towards her.

"I put in extra reeses pieces, just for you." Tyler winked at Lisa who grinned in amusement, her eyes flicking to Ivy who was trying to contain her laughter.

"Oh my god, stop trying to flirt Tyler," came a third younger voice as Chloe appeared, holding a take out cup. "Hi Ivy," she added, waving shyly at the girls.

"Hi Chloe," Ivy responded kindly. "Are you enjoying your summer so far?"

Chloe Harrington might be like her brother in the looks department, but she was worlds away from Tyler. While he shone like a star in school, Chloe liked to step back from the limelight. She was delicate and shy while Tyler was a joker and loud.

"Yeah it's been good," she smiled sheepishly. "I've just been chilling."

"Hey Chloe, maybe Ivy can put in a good word for you to James huh?" Tyler said, smirking, putting his arm around his sister and clearly trying to get pay back for her earlier remark.

It seemed to work as Chloe's cheeks immediately blushed and she stamped on her brother's foot in retaliation. The moment he jumped back, she rushed off.

"Don't mind her," Tyler laughed nonchalantly to Lisa. "She's just trying to be an ass."

Ivy rolled her eyes and gave Tyler a pained look. "Don't be mean Tyler. Personally I think *my* brother is the ass for not dating her."

"Nah James is cool," Tyler smiled. "Sam and him are like my little bros."

"And don't we all know it," Ivy sighed, knowing that Tyler had snuck Sam and James Xbox games that they were technically too young to be playing.

"Anyway ladies," Tyler said, noticing a few impatient customers waiting for him to serve them. "Duty calls! See you later."

The girls waved to him, shaking their heads in dismay as they both took a sip from their milkshakes.

"So," Lisa eventually said, her fingers entwined on the table as she stared at Ivy expectantly.

"So...?" Ivy responded, smiling with bemusement.

"Last night?"

"Oh shit! Yeah," Ivy laughed feeling dumb, shaking her head in amazement. "Last night."

Ivy told Lisa everything, starting with how she felt when she first saw Ryan, to the failed attempt at displaying any skateboarding skills, to him pushing her on the swing and how close they had got to *something* happening and how the night had ended with pillow fights, tickling and a conga line.

Ivy wasn't at all surprised by how perplexed Lisa looked when she finally finished her story.

"Okay..." Lisa started, her eyes wide from all of the information she had just been given. "Well first we need to talk about the swing thing and then I want to know about this whole conga situation!"

Ivy laughed, "the conga line was with my whole family."

"Yes but where was Ryan?"

"Behind me," Ivy said, her cheeks blushing.

"And where were his hands?"

"On my waist," Ivy said, coughing awkwardly, her skin prickling with heat.

"And *that* is why we need to talk about the conga line," Lisa explained, taking a sip from her milkshake. "But first things first, the

whole swing incident. Do you think he was going to kiss you?"

"I don't know," Ivy admitted, her voice coming out more whiny than she would have liked.

"Were you going to kiss him?" Lisa asked, whispering as best as she could, dipping her head but keeping her eyes on her friend.

Ivy's heart raced as she thought back to that moment, the closeness of Ryan's body, the pounding in her ear as her pulse beat erratically and the feeling of tension in the air, a passion that needed to be explored between them.

"Yes," Ivy admitted breathlessly. "I would have kissed him."

Lisa beamed, smiling so that her pearly white teeth could be seen. She did a little clap of excitement and Ivy tried to shush her, torn between being embarrassed and wanting to smile.

"And I feel like he might have kissed me back," Ivy admitted, only making Lisa's grin widen. "But of course James, Zach and the boys just had to ruin the moment," Ivy added bitterly, taking another sip from her milkshake.

"Oh don't worry about that," Lisa said nonchalantly, flicking her hand like the boys were some annoying fly she could just swipe away. She leaned closer to Ivy and whispered, "if you almost had a moment on the first night he was here, you've got *plenty* of time before he goes home to have another moment."

"I don't know," Ivy said self consciously, playing with a strand of her hair.

"What do you mean?" Lisa asked in confusion. "You *want* to have another moment with him, don't you?"

"Yes," Ivy admitted biting her lip nervously. "But I also don't want to rush things. That *almost* moment between us just happened naturally. I want it to be natural."

Lisa pondered on Ivy's words for a moment, swirling her straw around her peanut butter milkshake. "Well then, you've just got to

make sure you have plenty of time together this summer."

"That shouldn't be too hard," Ivy reasoned, her smiling becoming a little less unsure and a bit more confident. "I'll guess we'll start with today, and then we've got the party tomorrow."

"Exactly," Lisa grinned. "Just take it one step at time and I'm sure something will happen naturally between you."

Ivy smiled gratefully at her best friend, feeling relieved that she had confided her thoughts to Lisa. Being able to talk it out made her feel better, it made the whole idea of something happening between her and Ryan achievable.

"So the conga line," Lisa said with a smirk. "He has his hands on your waist? How did that make you feel?"

Ivy laughed despite the heat rising in her cheeks, "you sound like a therapist."

"I kind of *am* your therapist!"

"Point taken," Ivy grinned before bashfully leaning back against the booth and admitting, "I really liked the feeling of his hands on my waist."

Lisa squealed with excitement, enough to make Ivy shush her, cover her mouth and then burst out laughing when a few people in the diner stared at them.

Ivy had just removed her hand from Lisa's mouth when her best friend's blue eyes flickered to the window and she smiled, "well maybe you'll get that feeling again, because he's here."

Ivy swung around to look at the window so fast she was positive she had pulled a muscle. It took her only a second to find him, he really did stand out with his handsome face, fit body and the fact that he was coming down the road of his skateboard.

"Wow, who is *that*!?" Gabi Rodriguez's voice trailed from two booths down.

"He's so *exotic!*!" Gasped Heather James from one of the middle tables.

Ivy felt her stomach twist uncomfortable and she shuffled in her seat. Hawkins was a small town, anyone new always sparked interest. But it didn't mean Ivy could just sit there and be okay with the comments. Gabi and Heather were popular and beautiful, Ivy could feel the intimidation setting in and she just wanted to melt straight into the floor.

"Don't worry," Lisa's determined voice broke through Ivy's insecurities as she squeezed her hand to grab her attention. "Ryan is *yours*. You know it, he knows it and the popular crowd will know it soon enough."

Ivy gave Lisa a thankful smile, her heart beating loudly as she watched Ryan enter the diner, trying to ignore the amount of eyes staring at him. Some of those glances were from the older generation, their gazes mixed between curiosity and others showing a clear sign of racism. While the teenage girls who had come to stare at Tyler had turned their battering eyelashes onto Ryan instead.

"Ryan!" Lisa shouted, waving at the boy who she hadn't even met in person. Thankfully she caught his attention and the moment he spotted Ivy, he made his way over to the booth.

"Make some room for him," Lisa whispered to Ivy through a smile.

Ivy feeling slightly flustered slid further into the booth so she was right next to the glass window, leaving space for Ryan to sit beside her.

The teenage boy arrived at the table and Ivy's nerves seemed to slowly fade as she grinned, relief that he was here outweighing anything else.

"Hey," Ryan said breathlessly as he got into the booth and gave Ivy a one armed hug.

"Hi," she responded, sighing happily that he was beside her again. She gestured to Lisa who was grinning ear to ear watching the couple. "Ryan this is Lisa, Lisa this is Ryan."

"Hey!" Lisa smiled, "it's really good to finally meet you!"

"You too," Ryan grinned. "Ivy's always talking about you."

"And she's always talking about *you*."

Ivy gave Lisa a slight warning stare which her best friend ignored.

"Only good things I hope," Ryan teased, prodding Ivy in the side as she laughed, flicking him on the shoulder in response.

"Nah, she says she hates you." Lisa joked making Ivy snigger and for Ryan to sigh dramatically.

"Why doesn't that surprise me," he said sadly, sniffing.

"Oh shut up you." Ivy laughed, squeezing his hand for a moment, trying to hide the way her smile wavered at the electricity she felt.

"How long have you girls been here?" Ryan asked, pointing to the milkshakes.

"Only ten minutes or something," Lisa lied, shrugging her shoulders.

"Want some?" Ivy offered her milkshake to Ryan who smiled, taking her straw and sipping up some of the cool chocolate drink.

Ivy took a sip afterwards and tried to not blush too much at the look on Lisa's face. She knew *exactly* what she was thinking. Could practically hear her best friend's thoughts screaming *they are sharing a straw!*

"Hey Ryan my man!" Tyler's voice came, cheerful and upbeat as he high fived Ryan.

"Hey Ty!"

"How is sunny old San Diego? You got a babe back in Cali?"

Ryan and Ivy's cheeks seemed to reddened in unison.

"Um no, no babe."

"Well if you're interested in a long distance relationship, there's plenty of girls here that seem interested," Tyler said patting Ryan on the shoulder.

"Thanks man," Ryan mumbled in response, coughing to clear his throat, while Ivy and Lisa exchanged a look.

"You guys ready to order?" Tyler asked, thankfully moving the topic on as he pulled the pencil from behind his ear.

"Yeah," Lisa said immediately, knowing that the air was tense between Ivy and Ryan. This time not from passion, more likely confusion.

"Can I have the double decker burger please, no pickle and french fries."

Tyler wrote down Lisa's order giving her a little wink before turning to Ivy.

She tried to focus, relieved she already knew what she wanted. "Can I have the triple decker burger with french fries please. And another chocolate shake thank you."

"Can I have the same as Ivy," Ryan said looking down at the menu. "But can I have waffle fries instead?"

"No problem man," Tyler said as he rounded off the list and took the menus off the table. "See you in a bit guys," he added with a wave, heading over to the kitchen.

Ivy watched him go, trying to ease her nerves to look back at Ryan. She thought about what Tyler had said to him and couldn't stop her mind from worrying that Ryan would find someone else. What if it was someone that she knew? How could she even be around them?

Ivy's phone dinged and she was thankful for the momentary distraction. She sighed, seeing it was off Lisa and pulled her phone screen away from Ryan's sight, thankful that her best friend had engaged him in conversation to distract him.

Lisa: I can see that look on your face. Don't worry about other girls, there

are no other girls! You are a queen and he is yours. Go get him 🐾

Ivy exhaled a shaky breath, locking her phone and tucking it into the pocket of her denim shorts. She gave Lisa a quick glance and a grateful smile.

Just take it one step at a time, Ivy told herself. Just start with the party.

"What are you doing tomorrow night?" Ivy blurted out, turning to look at Ryan who was surprised by her sudden question.

"Nothing that I can think of, why?"

Ivy tried to grin and make it look natural, like she was relaxed when in reality she was screaming inside of her mind. "Because me and Lisa are going to a party and we wanted to know if you wanna join us?"

"Since when is a party your scene?" Ryan said smiling incredulously, clearly surprised at Ivy's change of character.

She laughed, shrugging her shoulders. "It was Lisa's idea at first, but the more I've thought about it, the more I think it could be fun."

Ryan looked at her, mild curiosity in his dark eyes. "Okay," he responded, his lips curving into a grin. "Yeah why not, I'll come."

"Great," Ivy exhaled not just a breath but some of her anxiety, she smiled at Ryan and continued to smile at him even when Lisa started telling him about Kimberley Kelly's big house in Loch Nora where the party would take place.

"And she's got a pool!"

"That's awesome," Ryan said eagerly, before turning to look at Ivy with a mischievous smile, "you're gonna have to be careful that you don't end up falling in."

Ivy smirked, narrowing her eyes at Ryan. "Maybe you will need to be careful that you don't get pushed in!"

Ryan laughed, turning to look at Lisa. "Has Ivy ever told you about her seventh birthday?"

"No," Lisa replied with an intrigued and amused grin.

Ivy sighed, hiding her face in her hands as Ryan animatedly told the story of Ivy's birthday party which had been spent in California. She had talked about her party dress for weeks to a very bored Ryan. And on the day of the party, just after making a wish and blowing out her candles, Ivy slipped and fell straight into the Sinclairs' swimming pool. Ryan had laughed so hard and had reached out his hand to help her, only to then let go of her hand so she fell back in.

Ryan and Lisa were still laughing when Tyler brought them their food and drinks. Ivy joined in with the laughter, especially when she tried to take a bite of all of the layers of her triple decker burger, only for it to fall apart in her hands.

"You took on too much," Lisa sighed sympathetically, shaking her head while Ivy and Ryan laughed.

The trio talked a bit about school and Ryan's baseball team, all leaning in when Ryan showed them different videos on his phone.

Ivy finished her fries and reached over to steal a waffle fry from Ryan, he looked scandalised and she grinned at him as she slowly chewed the waffle.

"Joey doesn't share food!" He shouted at her, making her burst out laughing. He poked her nose with a milkshake and she tried to lick it off with her tongue, eventually giving up and grabbing a napkin.

"Ryan why can't you just transfer schools?" Lisa asked as the trio walked through Mirkwood, taking a short cut to the Hopper's residence where El was waiting to drive them all home.

Ryan was piggy backing Ivy, his shoes snapping branches now and again as they walked.

"The *hilarity* of you two is insane! Ivy on her own is just plain boring -"

"Hey!" Ivy yelled, but joined in the laughter with her friends.

"Man I wish I could," Ryan sighed, holding onto Ivy's legs. "But I don't

think my parents would let me."

They walked for a little while longer, pausing when they came to a clearing that looked like it had been disturbed.

Ryan shook his head, "I don't know why people would camp here, it's creepy here if you ask me."

Lisa grinned as they carried on through the clearing. "Ah so you've heard all the mysterious tales of Hawkins!"

Ivy was thankful that she couldn't see Ryan's face right now. Her arms around his neck tightened slightly, hoping he wouldn't say anything he shouldn't. Of course their parents had told them the stories, ensuring that they kept the secret.

"You could say that," Ryan laughed slowly, his voice a little nervous. "But um, it's all just stories you know. It's not like it's *real*."

"Oh I believe it," Lisa said smiling to herself as she stepped over a log.

"What do you mean?" Ivy and Ryan said in unison, a tinge of panic in both of their voices.

Lisa shrugged, "not the monsters and all that. But that there was a girl with powers? Oh I totally believe it! Like all those witness accounts? They've got to come from *somewhere*. As they always say, every story has to have come from some kind of truth."

Ryan and Ivy stayed quiet, unsure what to say. Mercifully Lisa moved the conversation on to what they could do while Ryan was in town.

"We've got to go to the movies, and what about the quarry? Oh! And we *have* to go to the community pool."

"Sounds good to me," Ryan said smiling, adjusting Ivy so that she jumped up his back a bit higher.

"Me too," Ivy replied. "I'm sure the others would want to come as well." She could just imagine the fun her brothers, cousins and family would have.

Lisa paused, looking around the woods for a moment. "Isn't this where your parents got married Ivy?"

"A little more over there," Ivy said pointing to the location her parents had said their vows and taken their children back to many times.

The trees were less dense, the area still special to her parents and maintained that way by her grandpa who came to check the clearing every once in a while.

"Ah there it is," Lisa smiled as they walked up to an old tree. The heart still carved into it, names added over the years.

El + Mike

11/07/83

Ivy, James, Ben

"Aw that's really cute," Lisa smiling, her fingers delicately touching the tree bark.

"My parents *are* kind of cute," Ivy admitted with a small grin. "And *very* sentimental. This is where they met. In these woods."

"What a weird place to meet," Lisa mused looking around.

"Under very weird circumstances," Ryan muttered, Ivy kicking him in the side making him groan slightly.

There was a snap of a branch and the teenagers jumped, looking around the quiet woods for the source of the sound. There was nothing, until a deer could be seen just behind some of the bushes.

"Okay maybe this place *is* a little creepy," Lisa laughed nervously.

"Come on," Ivy grinned, "my grandparents house is just by there." She pointed towards the house that could just be seen through the green leaves.

Lisa looked slightly relieved and headed that way, Ivy holding onto

Ryan as she turned her head to look back at the tree, smiling to herself as she remembered how her mom had carved the names into the bark with her powers, the intricacy she had was beautiful. Ivy hoped that one day she could master her own powers like that. But for now, she had to keep them under wraps.

Because just like Mirkwood, something could look so beautiful, but could be so dangerous.

Notes for the Chapter:

So what did you guys think?! I love getting your feedback :-) We have so much to come with this story, it is only just getting started and there's still characters to acquaint you with; Steve, Robin, Nancy, Jonathan, their daughters and not to forget Karen and Ted! So please don't think I am missing them out, they will all arrive in time as the story develops :-)

A big thank you to my lovely boyfriend for proof reading this chapter for me, so that I could get myself ready for work tomorrow!

Thank you all for reading and thank you so, so much for the reviews! They are my fuel to keep going! :-D

4. Party Like it's 2013

Notes for the Chapter:

So here we are! I FINALLY have Chapter 4 for you all! I can honestly tell you that I have spent my only two days off work writing this. I have literally done nothing else with my weekend XD I hope everyone is doing okay? As most of you know, I work in a hospital so it has been incredibly busy the last few months in work and I have been picking up extra shifts where I can to cover my colleagues who have been off with the virus.

I was really hoping to get this chapter out last week but then my Nana sadly passed away and it has pushed me back. I'm trying to process my grief and trying to find the positives in life and be grateful for what I do have.

Just a little disclaimer to add, I have been asked a few times why Steve and Robin are together as Robin is gay. When I was writing The Life You Deserve, which I completed before season 3, all we knew about Robin was that she would be working with Steve and that Maya had done a screen test with Joe. So I assumed (obviously incorrectly!) that she would be his love interest. I loved the twist of course :-) But in TLYD Robin and Steve got married and had two children, Tyler and Chloe. And I have decided to keep it that way for the sequel. I hope that is okay with everyone.

I hope you enjoy this chapter, it's a LONNNNNGGGGG ONE! :-)

Chapter 4 - Party Like it's 2013

"It doesn't matter what age I get to, I am *never* going to like doing laundry," Mike muttered as he folded the fluffy white towels that El had just passed him out of the dryer.

"No one *likes* doing the laundry," El smirked as she grabbed a load of dirty clothes and put them into the washer. "It just needs to be done."

"I suppose," Mike sighed as he added the towels to the laundry basket ready to take upstairs. He got distracted by a frustrated sigh from Ben who was also in the basement, pouring over his campaign at the table Mike had set up for him and his friends to play D&D.

It was Sunday afternoon, and whilst their youngest son was preparing for his friends to arrive for their sleepover that night, James was no doubt playing his Xbox in his room and Ivy was already getting ready for the party. Her and Lisa had insisted they had to start getting ready, because clearly 7 hours wasn't enough.

"Who has a party on a Sunday night?" Mike randomly blurted out as he leaned against the dryer.

El laughed as she put powder into the washing machine, she shook her head but kept her eyes on her task. "Honey, it's summer. If they're not working, *every day* is a Sunday to these kids."

"I suppose," Mike replied with a frown. After his heart to heart with El the day before, Mike was trying desperately to not make a big deal about Ivy going to a high school party. But it *was* a big deal. It was her first adult party, her first time taking a guy to a party and the first party that neither Mike nor El could chaperone to make sure that Ivy kept control of her powers. To say Mike was nervous would be an understatement.

"You have told her she can call us anytime, right?" Mike asked El, his brow set into a worried line. "If she feels intimidated, or if she does something stupid, or if someone sees her using her powers, or – "

"Babe," El said softly, her hand covering Mike's as she gave him a

kind smile. "I have talked to her and she knows all of that. I *promise*."

Mike nodded, his jaw tight but his heart calming slightly at his wife's supportive words.

El took both of his hands this time and rocked them gently with her own, smiling tenderly at him as she spoke. "My powers never stopped me from going to parties, or going to the movies, or to the pool, or to the lake. We've got to let her live too."

"I know," Mike replied quietly, heaving a nervous breath. He brushed a strand of El's wavy hair from her face and smiled lovingly at his wife as he cupped her cheek, his thumb gently brushing against her skin. "We did have some fun didn't we," he added with a small smirk, memories of parties, dances and concerts rushing to the front of his mind.

El grinned, a glint in her eyes as she whispered, "we still have fun now."

"How am I meant to concentrate on my campaign when you are both being *gross*?" Ben mumbled, not taking his eyes off his Dungeon Master's Guide.

His parents snorted with humour, not moving away from each other until El's phone vibrated, distracting them enough to pull back. Mike carried on putting clean clothes into the laundry basket while El absentmindedly checked her phone, smiling to herself as she pulled up the text message in question.

"Max says that the moms need to go out for dinner tonight," she said with a smile, her hazel eyes flickering down the group chat called *MILFS* which El, Max, Laura and Jen were members of.

"You should!" Mike commented as he matched a pair of socks, a look of triumph on his face. "You all deserve a night off. Plus, I know how much you've missed Max."

El was quiet enough for Mike to look up at his wife. He could see the hesitation in her expression and he paused his task, smiling kindly at her. "I'll hold the fort here. And if Ivy and Ryan need anything, they

can call me or Lucas."

El bit her lip deep in thought for a moment, a slight frown playing on her forehead. "And you promise not to be mean to Ryan?"

Mike laughed, unable to hide the amused glint in his eyes. "*I promise.*" He sighed, throwing the paired socks into the basket. "I just wish they were those adorable little babies again, sharing a changing mat while we all took photos, and awed and cooed over them."

El grinned, her eyes slightly glazed over as she too remembered their young parenting days. The days of baby vomit all down their clothes, breastfeeding struggles and then success, the disrupted sleep and the beautiful first smiles and giggles. Now it was mood swings, loud music, video games and stocking the fridge for it only to be empty two seconds later.

"They are still adorable," El reasoned. "Just in a different way now."

"How so?" Mike laughed as El handed him the full laundry basket, the clean clothing spilling over slightly.

"They are adorable *together,*" El said simply, her smile wide and happy. "The way they act around each other." She exhaled a delicate breath, looking up at Mike with sparkling eyes. "Don't you remember that feeling at the beginning? The swooping in your stomach? The racing in your heart? Even when we just held hands?"

Mike grinned, his heart thumping in his chest as he looked at El, his gaze caught by her own, captivating him in the moment. Everything else just stopped, even only for a minute. The loud spinning of the washing machine, the scratch of Ben's pencil in his book, the distant barks of Eggo in the garden.

Mike leaned down as El lifted up onto her tiptoes, her hand going to Mike's rough stubbled cheek as they kissed softly, their lips lingering as they smiled against each other.

"You still give me that feeling," Mike whispered, a warmth filling his chest.

El's smile only widened, he could feel it against his mouth. "And you

still give me that feeling too," she said softly, pulling back only slightly to look into his amber eyes. "But it's even better now. I have the security of you and me, I *know* I've got you for life."

"You bet you're stuck with me for life!" Mike warned, a teasing smile playing on his lips.

El laughed, her eyes sparkling so much it was like the hazel colouring of her irises had glitter sprinkled into them. "And I wouldn't want it any other way."

The continuous vomiting noises from Ben eventually pulled the parents out of their moment and they humoured their youngest son with a little wave.

"Right," El said, clapping her hands together as she tried to get back into mom mode. "If you take up the clean laundry, I'll get started on cleaning the kitchen."

"We are the dream team!" Mike called as he hoisted the heavy laundry basket against his thin waist and started walking backwards from El. They shared a content smile before Mike made his way up the basement stairs, wondering where to start.

"Get the smelliest room out of the way first," he mumbled to himself as he passed the kitchen and headed up the main stairs towards the landing.

James's bedroom door was open ajar and his shouts and cries of "I've got this! I've got this!" told Mike that his son was in the middle of an Xbox battle, until he groaned and exclaimed "damn you Bieblove!" leading his dad to believe that the battle was probably now over.

"I'm coming in bud," Mike called, nudging the door open with his foot and crinkling his nose at the oh-so familiar smell of a teenage boy's room.

James was sat on his desk chair, his headset on and his eyes glued to the screen as he watched the last player of his team try to complete the game.

"Your eyes are going to turn square sitting that close," Mike

commented as he heaved the laundry basket onto the chest of drawers and started to pick out James's clothes.

James snorted, keeping his eyes on the screen. "You know that's not true right?"

"You really want to test that theory?"

James didn't say anything in response, but Mike smirked to himself as he saw out of the corner of his eye, his son slowly wheeling the desk chair further away from the screen.

"Eurgh he got you too," James muttered darkly into the microphone of his head piece, watching the gameplay of Zach's character, the final one in the game of three, being killed. Mike frowned, his eyes flickering to the screen, unable to stop his curiosity. Whoever this Bieblove_13 person was, they were good.

Mike took out all of James's clean laundry from the basket and placed them on top of the black dresser, turning his gaze to his son who had crossed his long legs in his seat and was now checking his phone messages.

James looked so much like Mike, it was kind of crazy how they could be so similar. They had the same features, the same hair, the same height, well the same height at 13, and the same attitude. The only difference was James had inherited El's beautiful hazel eyes.

Mike looked at his son and thought back to being his age and how difficult it had been. Of course his main worries were *very* different to James's. He wasn't concerned about Xbox games and an unknown gamer who was kicking his ass. No, Mike was worried over the love of his life. Unsure if she was alive or dead, going crazy with grief and guilt as he desperately wished her back to him. Calling out to her every night. Mike wouldn't change his story, because El was worth all of it. But he was thankful that his children hadn't known that pain, and he planned to keep it that way.

Mike wanted to be the best dad he could be. He didn't want to be an absent father or not be aware of what was going on in his family. He cringed slightly, his stomach twisting with uncomfortableness as he

remembered his conversation with El, who had told him to speak to James about growing up.

He didn't want to shy away from these conversations, so while trying to summon a braver version of himself, the Mike that he was when fighting Demogorgons and Hawkins Lab, he turned to face James like he was facing a brand new evil.

Puberty.

"James?" Mike started, clearing his throat and standing awkwardly in front of the dresser. He crossed his arms hoping that it would add a more serious note to his stance, but James merely gave him a glance.

"Yeah?"

Mike coughed as he shuffled from one foot to the other. "You're um...you're growing up now. You're a teenager, and um...I think it's time we talk about puberty and everything that comes along with that..."

James slowly looked up from his phone, his face filled with confusion before he blinked and his lips started to curve into an amused smile.

"What are you trying to achieve here?"

Mike sighed in frustration and walked over, sitting on the end of James's unmade bed while his son spun his desk chair around to face his father. If anything, it looked like James was giving Mike a talk, not the other way around.

"I just...I just think we should have a *talk*. Man to man. Father to son."

James smirked, his eyes narrowing knowingly. "Are you trying to give me a sex talk?"

Mike could feel warmth rising in his cheeks despite his desperate attempts to not be embarrassed about this conversation. "You're thirteen now. You might be having certain feelings about someone, and before you really are at an age when you and that person might want to *act* on that feeling, I think it's important that you are

informed."

"Oh dad," James exhaled, leaning forward in his chair and clasping his hands together, looking at his father with sympathy. "I know you're from prehistoric times and everything, but I do *know* how babies are made. I go to school, they teach us sex ed."

"Right," Mike laughed in relief, a weight leaving his shoulders. He smiled genuinely, relieved for a moment that his role in this topic was complete. But before he could walk away, he heard a voice in his head, very similar to El, urging him to add, "but if you do need any information, any advice or anything, I want you to know that you can come to me." Mike grinned, "I don't want you to feel as embarrassed as I have! Okay?"

James gave him a very rare smile, which in Mike's opinion had very little sarcasm to it. He felt honoured by this. "Okay dad," his son added, before there could be voices heard over the headset.

Mike decided to leave his son in peace, well, as much peace as could be had when you were playing an 18 rated game that Mike pretended he didn't notice James owned.

Mike was just picking the laundry basket back up when he heard a distinct voice in the speaker that made James snigger and reply, "no Sam, my dad was just trying to give me the sex talk."

Mike rolled his eyes, "make sure you put this laundry away!" he said backing out of the room.

"Ha!" James laughed, clearly not hearing Mike and going back into his own world, turning his chair towards the screen and picking up his controller again. "Yeah I bet Uncle Dustin's version was better. Yeah my dad's version was kind of lame - "

"Hey!" James added in surprise when Mike threw his son's balled up clean socks at his face in revenge for his comment.

"You're lucky it wasn't a dirty one! Now put your laundry away," Mike reiterated as he exited James's bedroom. Once he was out he let down the parent mask and shook his head in amusement at his son's

cheek, and at the embarrassment that was the failed sex talk.

At least I don't have to repeat that talk for another three years, Mike thought to himself, feeling grateful that Ben wasn't under the complicated title of 'teenager' just yet.

"Three years to perfect it," Mike mumbled to himself in self-pity as he knocked on Ivy's door, surprised that she could even hear the sound over the music that she had blaring through the small docking station that sat on her desk. The smell of perfume and nail polish hit his nostrils so sharply his eyes felt like they were watering.

"Well don't you look nice," Mike couldn't help but tease as his daughter stood in the doorway with a pale green face mask on her fair skin and her hair wrapped up in a towel. All she could do was roll her eyes in response, the mask dry and almost ready to come off.

"Delivery," Mike said in a pleasant voice as he handed Ivy over her clothes.

"Thanks mail man," she joked back in a tight voice, her inability to move her mouth properly made Mike laugh. She took her folded laundry from her dad and closed her bedroom door again.

"It's so wonderful being appreciated," Mike talked to himself as he lifted the now much lighter laundry basket to his and El's room. Reality catching up with him that there was no one in there to hand the clothes over to. Because if there was anything worse than actually *doing* laundry, it was putting it away.

"I hate laundry," Mike groaned, pushing open his bedroom door and accepting his fate.

The day was going far too quickly for Ivy's liking. She had done her face mask, Lisa had painted her toe nails and now her best friend was trying to do something with her hair while the girls swayed to the beats playing from Ivy's speakers.

"Starships were meant to fly!" Lisa sang into the brush, her own hair in rollers.

"Hands up and touch the sky!" Ivy joined in, raising her own arms and smiling widely. "Can't stop 'cause we're so high!"

"Let's do this one more time!"

The girls continued to sing along to the Nicki Minaj track until it slowly faded away and Selena Gomez *Come and Get it* took over.

"Oh my god," Lisa sighed, clutching the hair brush to her chest. "I'm in love with Selena."

Ivy laughed, "I thought you were in love with Kimberley Kelly?"

Lisa shrugged, "a girl's got to have options."

Ivy smiled but it was short lived. She couldn't imagine how hard it was for Lisa, being one of the only openly gay students at high school. She had been bullied on and off and put up with so much, and yet she still smiled. She refused to let anyone diminish her sparkle and that was one of the many things Ivy loved about her best friend.

"I've got to be honest," Lisa sighed with a heavy breath, making Ivy turn slightly to look at her with concern. "I don't know *what* I'm doing with your hair."

"Oh," Ivy laughed, slightly relieved that was the only thing bothering her best friend. She shrugged looking at her reflection in the mirror. "I don't mind honestly."

"I mind," Lisa pouted, picking up a dark strand of Ivy's hair. "You're beautiful, of course you are. But I need to make you *party ready* for Ryan!"

"You really don't have to," Ivy blushed, trying to pretend that she wasn't anxiously counting down the hours until she saw the boy in question.

"Maybe a bit of glam will give you the extra confidence boost to ask him out," Lisa said happily as she continued to brush through Ivy's long hair.

"Shouldn't I wait for him to ask *me* out?" Ivy cringed before quickly adding, "I mean, if he even *wants* to ask me out."

"Okay first of all he *definitely* wants to ask you out," Lisa said sternly, pointing the brush at Ivy's reflection, both girls looking at each other in the mirror. "And second of all, this isn't the eighteenth century! You *can* ask him out. It's not a crime and it's not going to make him lose manly points or something."

"I suppose," Ivy smiled, her cheeks pink enough she was sure she wouldn't need any blusher when they started their makeup.

"But it's so scary to be the one to ask," Ivy blurted out as Lisa attempted to start a French braid.

"You've just gotta have confidence sweetie," Lisa smiled as she attempted to add another section of hair to the braid. "And speaking from someone outside of the circle, I can tell you that he feels the same way about you too. So you really don't have anything to be scared of."

"But some people are just hard to read," Ivy reasoned, biting her lip with worry.

Lisa snorted, "honey this isn't Pretty Little Liars! Trust me, he's not hiding his feelings very well! He is literally the heart eyes emoji when he looks at you."

Ivy grinned, unable to stop the pleased smile spreading on her lips. Her heart felt like it was racing and she couldn't stop the breathlessness she was experiencing. She kept the smile on her face as Lisa continued to try experimenting with her hair, sighing now again that it wasn't right.

There was a gentle knock on the door distracting both girls.

"Come in!" Ivy called, knowing who it would be. There was only one person who waited patiently like that to be let in.

El stepped into the room carrying a tray laden with sandwiches and two cans of diet coke.

"I thought you two might be hungry."

"Oh my god," Lisa exhaled, her smile widening as she looked from El to Ivy. "Your mom is so cool."

The girls laughed, a heartwarming look shared between the mother and daughter.

"Oh she's cooler than you know," Ivy grinned, winking at her mom who rolled her eyes in amused exasperation as she put the plate of sandwiches down on the vanity table in front of Ivy.

El cast her eyes over her daughter's hair, her eyebrows raising slightly in curiosity. "Ooh what's happening here then?"

"Well," Lisa said, sighing dramatically. "I'm *trying* to do a french plait that goes across her hair here and then the rest should fall graciously. But yeah..."

Ivy cringed trying to see the top of her head in the mirror, "you don't give me much confidence!"

El laughed, moving to Lisa's side. "Here, let me show you."

Ivy watched on with a smile as her mom intricately arranged her hair as Lisa had imagined. She closed her eyes for a moment, tapped her foot to the music and felt comforted by El gently combing and braiding her dark hair.

"Where did you learn to do this?" Lisa asked, unable to hide her amazement as she watched on, her blue eyes wide with interest.

El smiled to herself as her fingers expertly weaved strands of hair. "My sister in law, Ivy's Aunt Nancy used to show me and my best friend Max different hairstyles and then we learnt on each other's hair too."

"It's so weird to think of you and Max as teenagers," Ivy grinned, shuddering her shoulders. "Like I feel like you were all born as adults or something."

El laughed, shaking her head, her eyes bright with mirth as she

continued to fix Ivy's hair. "Well if you believe it or not, we were all teenagers once!"

"Even my dad?" Ivy smirked.

"Yes, *especially* your dad!"

"What does that mean?" Ivy cringed.

El shrugged, "I just want you to remember that we were teenagers too. We went to parties, stayed out too late sometimes. The whole teen experience? We did it all."

"I don't know whether to be proud or grossed out," Ivy muttered.

"Well *I'm* proud," Lisa joined in, making the other two laugh. "You're like the mom from Mean Girls."

"I'm not a regular mom – "

"I'm a *cool* mom!" the women all chimed in together before laughter took over once more.

Mike yawned as he waited for the coffee machine to finish roasting, the aromatic smell of coffee filling the kitchen as he stared at the device, willing it to brew quicker.

He looked up as soft footsteps came down the stairs, smiling when he caught sight of his wife, holding a tray laden with dirty dishes.

"So they liked the sandwiches then?"

"Of course," El smiled, putting the tray down on the counter above the dishwasher.

Mike begrudgingly moved away from the coffee machine and helped El to load the dishwasher. She was always better at this than him, she said it was just like playing Tetris but Mike wasn't sure that he agreed.

"So how are they getting on up there?" Mike asked, his eyes glancing

up at the ceiling for a moment.

"Good!" El said happily, closing the dishwasher and then leaning against the counter. "I did Ivy's hair whilst showing Lisa how to do a French braid. They're just starting to look at outfits now."

"Are they excited?"

"Oh definitely," El smiled, a twinkle of nostalgia in her eyes. "I could practically feel the excitement and nerves!"

"I can't believe we have a child old enough to be going to teenage parties," Mike laughed, trying to hide his own nerves as he jumped towards the coffee machine that was finally ready.

"I know," El sighed, handing Mike two clean mugs. "I just wish I could keep them wrapped in cotton wool their whole lives – "

"Why don't we?" Mike said, only half teasing.

El laughed, shaking her head in amusement at her husband. "*Mike.*"

"I'm sorry," he smiled, pouring the coffee into the mugs, while El playfully hit him on the head with a teaspoon, before handing him the sugar and urging him to add a little more to her own.

They were both sipping their coffees when James came trudging down the stairs, greeting them with a long and stretched out yawn before heading to the fridge. They watched their son as he scoured the contents, grabbing chocolate, dip and soda cans before shutting the fridge with his foot and heading to the cupboard, pulling out a large bag of chips and cookies and adding them to his pile.

He turned and caught his parent's eyes, not getting the look of amusement and mild disgust on their faces.

"Yes?"

"Do you want any bread for your heart attack sandwich?" Mike asked, raising his eyebrow.

"Hmm," James said looking up at the cupboard and adding a jar of

peanut butter to his pile. "Come to think of it, I could do with a sandwich."

"You're an animal. You do realize that right?"

"I am what you made me," James teased, backing out of the kitchen, stuffing a cookie in his mouth as he waved at his parents and disappeared.

"I think he was adopted," Mike said before gasping in pain when El shoved him with her powers. "Hey!" he laughed, rubbing at his side, "you know I'm only joking."

"Oh I know," El said, giving him a sharp look. "But I was in labor for 20 hours with that boy, and no one is taking that away from me."

"True," Mike smirked as he watched El grab the bread and start to make a sandwich. "Is that one for me?"

"No," El snorted, looking back at Mike with amusement. "This one's for our youngest baby."

"When did I go so far down the list?" Mike whined, standing behind his wife and putting his arms around her waist. He propped his chin on her shoulder and pouted.

El grinned, rolling her eyes playfully but not looking away from the sandwich. "You will always be my number one."

"But?"

"But our youngest needs feeding and it's our duty to get him fed."

"You're such a good mom," Mike exhaled happily, nuzzling El's neck with his nose and smiling against her skin when he saw the goosebumps that rose to the surface.

"I try," El sighed, leaning back against Mike's chest and closing her eyes for a moment.

"You're the best mom and I'm so proud of you."

El turned her head to look up at Mike and smiled, her eyes happy and beautiful as they sparkled. "Thank you."

Mike rubbed his nose against El's affectionately and pressed a gentle kiss to her lips. "Thank you for our babies."

El smirked, "it takes two to tango."

"It sure does." Mike grinned, winking at El as he kissed her again.

Mike carefully stepped down the stairs into the basement holding a plate of sandwiches while praying he didn't drop them. He spotted Ben still sitting at the table, his dungeon master's guide open in front of him with handwritten paperwork spread across.

"You okay bud?" Mike asked as he headed over to his son. "Mom made you some sandwiches."

"Okay," Ben said halfheartedly, not looking up from his plans. His youthful skin creased into a frown that was very unnatural for him.

Mike put down the plate of sandwiches in front of his son, hoping it would lure him out of his obvious turmoil. When Ben did nothing more than carry on writing, Mike pulled out one of the chairs and sat down.

He knew exactly what Ben was going through and could see it in his eyes. But not wanting to assume, he asked softly, "what's wrong?"

As if waiting to be asked, Ben dropped his pencil and heaved a dramatic sigh. "Logan and Seth will be here in a few hours and I *still* haven't finished the campaign! No matter what I write, it's just rubbish and they're going to hate it."

"No they won't," Mike said seriously, shaking his head. "Ben, your campaigns are fantastic!"

When his son did nothing but look down at his pages filled with scribbled writing, Mike sighed and pulled the seat in closer to the table. He placed his hands on some of the sheets of paper that had been discarded and started to look over the bullet point notes that

Ben had done.

"Ooh," he said with interest. "You're doing a campaign against Tiamat?" Mike tried not to smile too much when he noticed Ben lift his head.

"Yeah. I...um, I thought that it could take place on the Sword Coast and the townsfolk are attacked by dragons - "

"Will the party be chasing after the five dragon masks before they merge into the Mask of the Dragon Queen?!"

"Of course!" Ben said enthusiastically, his eyes widening slightly as his excited energy began to grow. "They are going to be up against the Cult of the Dragon and then they get the chance to destroy a subterranean dragon hatchery guarded by the cult!"

"Will they save the captive townsfolk?" Mike said, unable to hide his own enthusiasm at his son's campaign.

"Obviously!" Ben laughed, his grin so wide as he picked up his pencil and then grabbed for his paper. He gasped as he thought of a new idea and hurried to write. "And then while they're saving the captive townsfolk, they will find a wizard who has been imprisoned and they will help the party on their quest to the Dragon Queen Mask!"

Mike couldn't stop smiling as he watched his son and the energy that had erupted from inside of him the moment he had allowed his imagination to run free. Mike wasn't sure there was anything he loved more than seeing his family smiling like this, seeing them so overwhelmed with life and happiness that it radiated from them.

Ben paused in his writing, looking up at his dad. "Where should the raider's camp be?"

Mike smiled, pulling his chair closer to his son and rolling up his sleeves ready to help. An hour went by, filled with laughter and deep discussion, which involved Mike taking out some of his old campaigns to spark some ideas and resulted in the completion of the Dragon Queen quest.

"You want a soda bud?" Mike asked his son, both of them lying on the

carpeted floor of the basement, paper scattered all around them.

"Yes please," Ben replied, smiling at his dad as he sat up and started to gather the campaign together in his dungeon master's guide.

Mike stumbled to his feet and stretched his long limbs, yawning as he made his way towards the stairs. He paused when Ben shouted over to him.

"Thanks for helping me dad."

Mike looked back at his youngest and smiled, feeling his chest warm with pride. "I'm always here to help."

They shared a grin before Ben looked away, transferring his scribbled notes into the guide in his lap. Mike headed up to the kitchen, pulling out his smart phone when an idea sparked in his mind. He opened up the group chat *Dad Jokes* and quickly typed out a message.

Mike: Hey guys, seems like the kids have their plans tonight. Wanna play D&D?

Will: Don't you think we're a bit too old?

Dustin: Shut up Will, we know you've been dying to play!

Will: Was it that obvious?

Mike: Kind of.

Lucas: It was man, but it's all good because we're all in. Will you have time to do a campaign though Paladin?

Mike smirked, grabbing two soda cans from the fridge before typing out his reply.

Mike: It's already done.

The drive to the Wheeler house became bumpier as the Sinclair's turned off the main road and onto the long country road that led up to the house on the edge of the forest. The dirt track might have

caused a slight shaking on the steering wheel, but it was nothing like the nerves that twisted and swirled around Ryan's stomach.

He was wearing a short sleeve white shirt, black jeans and converse sneakers and *prayed* he wasn't overdressed. He hadn't exactly been to a high school party before. His friends back in California's idea of a party was messing about at the skatepark, sometimes sneaking a few beers in and trying stunts that could likely cause injury. This was new territory to Ryan, especially the girl element.

Ryan's hands gripped the steering wheel a little tighter and he coughed, straightening up slightly as he concentrated on the road.

"Are you doing okay there?" Max asked, sat beside her son on the passenger side while Lucas and Zach were in the back. Max was looking dressed up herself, but apparently all the moms were going out for dinner and cocktails so it was no surprise.

Ryan's parents had allowed him to drive not only to the Wheeler house that night, but he was also the designated driver for the party. It was a lot of responsibility, but he was happy to stay sober. Hopefully it would mean he could remain cool in front of Ivy and not doing anything stupid.

"Yeah I'm good," Ryan said eventually, giving his mom a sheepish smile before turning his attention back onto the road, the Wheeler house now appearing across the horizon.

"You're doing great son," Lucas commented with a pat on Ryan's shoulder who smiled bashfully.

"I'll be a better driver," Zach mumbled, not taking his eyes off his phone.

"Sure you will," Ryan rolled his eyes, not sparing his brother a glance but keeping his gaze on the destination.

"Well as long as I have my boys to taxi me around then I'm happy," Max teased, jumping in to prevent an argument between her sons. "All the years of carpooling will have been worth it."

"We've still got a few more years to go," Lucas chuckled, making Zach

cringe when his father tried to ruffle his short hair.

Max turned her blue eyed gaze onto Ryan and smiled softly watching her son, understanding the look on his face as if she could read his thoughts.

"You're going to have a great time tonight," she said with a proud smile. "And I know you'll look after the girls. We raised you right."

Ryan couldn't help the slight blush that raised to his cheeks as he flickered his eyes to his mom before looking back at the road, the Wheeler house was creeping up on them now, looking vast and almost intimidating to Ryan's racing heart.

"Thanks mom," he said, clearing his throat and trying not to smile too much.

"Just remember not to do anything *I* wouldn't do." Max said wisely, smirking to herself.

Lucas sniggered, "well that doesn't leave him with a lot of - "

"Hush Lucas."

Ryan and Zach both cringed in unison making their parents laugh playfully.

"We're only teasing," Max smiled, looking between her boys before settling back on Ryan. "Obviously you won't be drinking, but make sure Ivy and Lisa don't go crazy."

"And don't give anyone an excuse to start a fight or something," Lucas sighed. "This place is a lot more backwards than San Diego. Even now..."

"I know," Ryan nodded, the importance of showing that he understood the seriousness of his father's words meant he lost part of his anxiety over the party. "I'll stay away from trouble, I promise."

"I don't know why you're so worried," Zach said, finally looking up from his phone. "It's not like Ivy would let anything happen to him."

Ryan could feel heat rising to the surface of his skin again and he kept his focus on the road, not wanting his family to see the reaction on his face to his brother's words.

"That's true," Lucas admitted, "but Ivy can't be using her powers in public."

"Remember that their powers are the *most* important secret we keep," Max said looking back at Zach. "And we keep that secret for a very good reason. Their safety would be compromised if we didn't."

"I know," Zach said, his face solemn in the moment. It was very obvious that he understood and the Sinclair children had been brought up knowing the seriousness of the secret just as much as the Byers twins, Sam and the Harrington's. The Wheeler family meant so much to all of them, the families were always going to have a connection and nothing could break that.

Ryan pulled slowly into the gravelled drive as Lucas gestured towards the volvo, "park next to Mike's car."

Ryan cringed but did as he was told, hoping that Mike wouldn't care about him pulling up next to his car. He still felt like he was walking on eggshells with Ivy's father. They had never had a conflict but Ryan wasn't stupid, he had seen the glances Mike gave him and Ivy and that classic 'protective dad' flicker in his dark eyes.

So does that mean Mike can actually picture us as a couple? Ryan couldn't help but think hopefully. Surely to be getting that look of 'you hurt my daughter and I'll kill you' *actually* meant that Mike saw them as more than friends? Ryan felt a bemused smile appearing on his face, in all its craziness, it was actually a pretty good thought.

The Sinclairs all exited the silver Chevrolet Cruze and after locking the car Ryan started to feel the twisting coil of nerves returning to the pit of his stomach. He brushed down his shirt anxiously unaware that his mom was watching him.

"You look really handsome honey," Max said lovingly, tapping her son's cheek playfully.

"Yeah you look *really* handsome my little sweetie pie!" Zach goaded, a mischievous smirk on his face even when he had to jump away from Ryan's aimed kick.

"Aw what's the matter?" Max pouted, speaking in a sickly sweet voice and trapping Zach in a hug as he squirmed while Ryan and Lucas laughed. "Does my baby need some of mommy's attention? You'll always be my little cutie pie Zachy."

"Ew! Gross, stop it mom!"

"But you seemed so jealous of your brother!" Max teased, finally letting Zach go after she had plastered kisses on his cheeks.

Zach's face was practically red as he hurried to wipe the lipstick marks off his cheeks, shuddering while his parents and brother sniggered.

"This is abuse you know," Zach thundered as he followed his family into the Wheeler house. But any response was lost in the cheer of noise as Mike, El, Will and Jen shouted greetings to the Sinclair's.

"I'm going to find James," Zach called, before running up the stairs while his parents hugged their friends.

Ryan watched his brother go and hesitated, wondering whether to go and find Ivy. His gaze moved from the stairs to the busy kitchen and he shuffled his feet for a moment trying to decide.

What if I go upstairs and she's not ready? What if she's getting dressed?

Heat rose to Ryan's skin and he cleared his throat, deciding to play it safe on go into the kitchen. At least it was a safe zone. Well, except for Mike.

Ryan tried to navigate around all the parents, accepting El's offer of a drink and taking a soda can out of the fridge.

"So you're telling me that we are joining your ten year old son's game of D&D?" Lucas asked Mike. The dad's were leaning against the counter with a bottle of beer in their hands.

"Yep," Mike said with a smile. "And trust me, it's a good campaign."

Lucas seemed to weigh this up for a moment and then nodded. "Cool," he commented before taking a sip from his bottle.

"Well while you guys babysit, us moms will be going wild." Max teased, clinking glasses with Jen and El.

"Are you going to embarrass me?" Lucas sighed looking at his wife, but the twitch of a smile on his face said he was only joking.

Max laughed, gesturing her wine glasses towards him. "Oh you know it!"

"Just don't try using snapchat again," Lucas smirked.

"Yeah I second that," Ryan mumbled, making the adults laugh, even Mike. *Wow, that's weird.*

"There's nothing wrong with my snapchatting skills thank you very much," Max said, lifting her chin in defiance.

"Which one is snapchat again?" El said bemused as she poured more wine.

"The one with the filters," Jen replied, rolling her eyes in amusement. "Lily and Grace do them *all* the time."

Ryan looked around the kitchen and frowned, "yeah where are the twins?"

"Watching *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*," Will responded, rubbing at his forehead.

"Oh," Ryan grinned.

"Apparently Kim is finding out the sex of her baby," Will added before taking a big gulp of his beer.

"Didn't she already have a baby? It had a strange name." Lucas said in confusion.

"Yeah, *North*. But even though they already *know* this, they've still got to watch the episode." Will sighed. "But they love Khloe too, so they wouldn't just stop watching."

"Don't forget they're excited about the Kardashian family holiday to Greece as well," Jen pointed out.

"This conversation sickens me," Lucas muttered before getting distracted by the sound of a car. "Anyway, sounds like the Henderson's have arrived."

"Oh good," Mike said, putting down his beer, "Dustin's bringing the pizzas."

"I'll call the kids," El said, her heels clicking against the tiled kitchen floor as she made her way towards the bottom of the stairs and shouted up. "Kids! Pizza's here!"

"Why didn't you just say Dustin's here?" Will laughed.

El sighed, "because I know they only care about pizza."

"Good point."

And just as expected, there was a rumble of feet as James and Zach came running down the stairs and Ben appeared from the basement with Seth and Logan just as Dustin's voice boomed into the house.

"I have arrived!" he called, while Sam ducked under his arm and hurried over to James and Zach.

"Hi guys," Laura smiled as she carried two non-alcoholic bottles of wine, being the designated driver for the mom's night out, while Dustin carried a crate of beer.

"You look gorgeous!" El commented, hugging Laura once she had put the wine down. All the moms had made an effort of course, finally free of scrubs and work clothes and now in their best dresses.

"Oh she's still got it," Dustin winked at his wife, making her smirk while Sam shuddered at his parents.

"Dustin," Mike started, looking around with a frown. "Where's the pizza?"

"Don't worry, they're coming," Dustin grinned mischievously, putting down the crate.

"What do you - "

"Just call me your pizza boy Wheeler!"

"Oh no, not you," Mike groaned as he watched Steve Harrington walk into his house carrying so many boxes of pizzas that all that was visible was his denim jeans and the top of his perfect hair.

Behind Steve was his daughter Chloe, looking slightly nervous as she carried two extra pizza boxes. Her blue eyes found James who was already looking at her in surprise and they both hurried to look away from each other.

"Well hello there Sinclairs!" Steve said, as Dustin and Will helped him to put down the pizza boxes so that he could engulf Max and Lucas in a bone breaking hug. "Long time no see!"

"Hi Steve," Max choked, cringing at the tight embrace.

"Where's Robin?" Lucas asked, coughing slightly when Steve finally released them from the hug.

"She's on duty tonight," Steve replied as he took the two extra pizza boxes out of Chloe's hands.

"Ah the perks of being the Chief of Police," Lucas sighed, shaking his head while Steve put his arm around his daughter.

"She loves it though. But maybe that's because she gets to boss me around," Steve teased.

Robin had been the Chief of Police at Hawkins since Hopper had retired. Her husband was one of her deputies and while there was a lot of playfulness over Robin's position, they managed to work together really well.

"Are you and Chloe joining us for pizza then?" El said kindly, smiling at Chloe before pulling out more plates.

"If you don't mind," Steve said, taking the beer bottle that Dustin offered to him. "Robin's in work and Tyler's going to that high school party tonight, so when Henderson offered a game of D&D I thought 'hey, why not!' and Chloe was happy to hang with the boys," Steve added pointing his beer to Sam, James and Zach.

Chloe looked embarrassed by this admission and busied herself with joining the pizza queue while Sam poked James in the ribs and smirked at the redness that had broken out on his thin cheeks.

"You're really joining us for D&D?" Mike asked Steve, his eyebrow rising suspiciously.

"Of course!" Steve laughed, before piling up his plate with pizza. "Hey! Do you remember that D&D campaign at your bachelor party?!"

"Yeah let's not talk about that in front of the kids," Mike muttered clearing his throat while Steve, Dustin, Will and Lucas laughed.

"Ivy!" El shouted over the noise in the kitchen as she stood again at the bottom of the stairs.

"Coming mom!"

Ryan, who had busied himself with eating pizza, stood up tall from where he was leaning against the kitchen counter. His eyes stuck on the stairs as he waited.

He saw her white converses first as they came around the corner of the landing. Then it was long and slim legs, a red high waisted skater skirt fluttering slightly just above her knees as she descended the stairs. She had on a white cropped camisole which showed just a slit of her stomach. It was enough. It still made Ryan's heart beat hammer in his chest.

Her dark hair flowed down her shoulders, a cute braid across the crown of her head. Ryan felt his fingers twitch with the sudden urge

to run his fingers through her hair, to touch those bare shoulders with his warm hands. He wondered if her skin was as soft as it looked

-

Ivy caught Ryan's gaze and he quickly closed his mouth, not even realising that his jaw had been close to the floor. He tried to contain his blush and smiled sheepishly at her. There was a look of surprise in her eyes and then a confident smile settled on her full lips.

The look on her face and the sparkling life in her eyes was more beautiful than anything.

"Aw girls!" El fawned, "you look gorgeous!"

"Thank you!" Lisa called from behind Ivy as the girls gathered into the kitchen. Lisa was wearing a black bodysuit with denim shorts and ankle boots. Her blonde hair was curly and fell to her shoulders.

"Thanks mom," Ivy said bashfully, her eyes going from El back to Ryan before shyly averting them again.

The girls were showered with compliments by the women in the room and Dustin, Steve and Will. The only exemptions were the boys and Mike and Ryan. Ryan didn't think he could articulate his words yet, no matter how much his mom wiggled her eyebrows at him to speak. He waited, not wanting to be put under the pressure of speaking up in front of his family and extended family.

He wasn't the only person in the room trying to choose his words carefully. Mike looked like he was frozen but it was obvious that the cogs in his brain were working overtime. A stern look from El seemed to be the only thing that got through to him and eventually blinked, a smile slowly making its way out.

"You look beautiful honey," he said quietly to Ivy who blushed in embarrassment but seemed happy with his response. They all knew that this was a better reaction than expected from the protective father.

"Thank you dad," Ivy said, gracing him with a rare smile that seemed to bring out a softer side of Mike. He put his arm around her and

gave her a kiss on the cheek.

Once Mike seemed to have given Ivy his blessing, the atmosphere in the room became much more comfortable and madness ensued once more: The boys fighting over the best pizza and seeing who could drink the most soda, the moms chattering over glasses of wine and the dads arguing over which characters they were going to play in Ben's D&D game.

Ivy and Lisa had been talking with Chloe about One Direction when Ryan pulled away from the boys and wandered over to them, with every fast beat of his heart it felt it jumped further from his chest and up into his throat.

"Hey Ryan," Lisa smiled, her voice was welcoming but there was a glint in her eyes.

"Hey," Ryan responded, smiling at Lisa and Chloe before his eyes settled on Ivy.

"Let's get some more pizza Chloe," Lisa quickly added, taking the youngest female's hand and pulling her away.

Ryan watched them go in confusion before the reason for that glint in Lisa's eyes became obvious. He contained his laugh into a smile and shook his head, before turning to Ivy. She was already looking at him, her gaze on his shirt.

"You look really good," she said, her voice a little higher than usual.

Ryan's skin suddenly felt warm as he cleared his throat and shuffled from one foot to the other. "Well um...I thought I'd put in an effort. Didn't want to embarrass you or something..."

Ivy's amber eyes flickered up to Ryan's and she smiled, shaking her head. "You could never *embarrass* me Ryan."

He laughed, unable to stop the way he was looking at her. He knew there was too much adoration in his eyes but he couldn't help it. "You really believe that?"

Ivy grinned, "well *no*. You have a talent at embarrassing me, but I

thought I would be nice."

Ryan nodded his head, trying to put on a serious face. "That's fair." He sighed, "I suppose I should be nice to you too."

"Oh *really!*" Ivy giggled, standing up tall and glaring at Ryan playfully. "I *dare* you to say something nice."

Ryan laughed, opening his mouth to say something humorous but he couldn't. His lips closed softly as he looked at Ivy. *Really* looked at her. The burnt orange swirl in her dark eyes that gave them that amber effect, the slender frame of her body which looked so feminine and so *strong*. And yet there was something delicate about her. Was it the softness of her skin? The cupid's bow of her lips? Or the gentle waves of her dark hair? Ryan thought it might be all three. He knew the power she possessed, the things she could do. Both beautiful and dangerous. But that wasn't what made her *Ivy*.

What made her *Ivy* was her kindness, her humour, her zest for life, the way she loved her family and friends. Her loyalty, her fight, her spirit and her beauty that just radiated from her heart. She was good from the inside out. She was everything.

"You *are* beautiful. Not just tonight. *Every day.*"

Ryan wasn't sure he would have believed he had just come out with those words if it wasn't for the way his mouth moved. He wasn't sure what to do, feeling completely caught in the moment.

Ivy was staring back at him, her lips slightly parted and her eyes wide as if she couldn't believe what he had said. Ryan's hands felt clammy and he suddenly felt like he was in a fight or flight moment.

Should he run? Laugh and pretend it was just a joke? *No. I'm not doing that.*

Realising that only left him with the truth, Ryan gulped, letting out a shaky breath as he stared back at Ivy, his eyes filled with need. *Needing* her to know he meant what he said, *needing* her to know that what she might be suspecting right now was true. He was completely in love -

"Hey kids!" Dustin called over from the island counter where all the adults stood, now turning their heads towards Ivy and Ryan. "There's still more pizza if you want some."

Ryan could feel everyone's eyes on him and heat started to rise within him, this time uncomfortable warmth that he just wanted to be freed from.

"Oh cool, pizza," he croaked out, not able to even look at Ivy as he hurried over to the food. He stuffed his mouth with pizza and hovered by the boys as they discussed games, hoping that Ivy would forget what he had said.

"Is there any reason why you have pushed us into the downstairs bathroom?" Lisa asked as Ivy struggled to shut the door, Chloe tried to move closer to the sink so the door could finally be locked.

Ivy sighed with relief and turned around to face the girls, leaning against the door while her heart pounded away. She felt close to bursting with thoughts racing through her mind.

"It was less suspicious than running up to my bedroom."

Lisa snorted, "because me and Chloe being pushed into the bathroom *isn't* suspicious at - "

"Ryan said I was beautiful!"

Lisa stopped short at Ivy's words and Chloe gasped in excitement.

"He *did*?" Lisa asked, her smile spreading. "What did he say *exactly*? This is very important!"

Ivy laughed, feeling suddenly light and dizzy. "He said that I am beautiful...everyday. Not just tonight."

"Oh my god!" Chloe squealed, covering her grin with her hands.

"Yes!" Lisa shouted triumphantly. "Don't you see what this means?! He doesn't just think you're beautiful when you're glammed up! He thinks you're beautiful *every day*!"

Ivy blushed but couldn't contain her smile, it was so vibrant and intense that her cheeks hurt. But she didn't care because Ryan thought she was beautiful and that was all that mattered. Could this really be it? Was she really going to go out on a whim and express her feelings?

The smile on her face faltered as nerves came rushing into her blood, seeping through her blood and attacking her heart as she gasped. "Oh my god," she muttered, running her hands through her hair. "Do I have to tell him how I feel tonight?!"

"I think you do!" Chloe smiled before frowning, "although I thought you guys were already together?"

Lisa snorted in amusement and Ivy groaned, shutting her eyes. "No we're not together."

"Yet," Lisa corrected, smiling between the girls before settling back at Ivy. "But this really could be your opportunity. You can do this!"

"I can do this," Ivy muttered, nodding her head as she took a deep breath and opened the bathroom door a crack, squinting to see the kitchen area. She abruptly shut the door again and turned to Lisa and Chloe. "No I can't do this yet, he's talking to James."

"I could distract James?" Chloe pitched in, her cheeks slightly pink.

Ivy shook her head, trying to think up a plan. "I need a bit of dutch courage," she said more to herself than the girls. "I'll have like one drink or something at the party and then I'll see if he wants to go outside or somewhere quiet and I'll...I'll just tell him."

"What will you say?" Chloe asked, her eyes wide with excitement.

"I'll say..." Ivy cringed trying to think how to word her feelings before hiding her face in her hands. "Oh god I don't know!"

"Why don't you tell him that you think he's beautiful everyday!" Lisa laughed while Ivy swiped her with a hand.

"Why don't you just wait for the right moment and just have fun regardless," Chloe suggested shyly, making the two older teens turn

to her. She looked away from them and shrugged. "Just an idea."

"That's not a bad idea," Lisa contemplated. "Just enjoy the party and see how things go. I mean, it's not like you two won't be spending *a lot* of time together. So if something's going to happen tonight then it will. And if it doesn't, there's always tomorrow. No pressure."

Ivy smiled nodding her head and feeling an ounce of relief finally entering her heart. "Y-Yeah," she stuttered looking between Lisa and Chloe. "I'm just gonna enjoy the night and see where it goes." She squeezed the youngest teen's hand and smiled, "thanks Chloe."

"I'm happy to help," Chloe smiled, her blue eyes shy. "And who knows, maybe one day you can help me with a guy *I* like."

"That might be weird for Ivy to help considering James is her brother," Lisa laughed playfully.

"You know it's *James*!?" Chloe gasped, an expression of horror on her face at her secret being discovered.

Lisa looked at Chloe and sighed sympathetically, tapping her shoulder, "oh honey, we *all* know. It's kind of obvious."

"Yeah," Ivy added, with a comforting smile to the thirteen year old girl. "But don't worry! James is clueless."

"What do I do?" Chloe asked, rubbing her arm self consciously. "I'm always trying to talk to him and he just doesn't *talk* you know. But he's so cute! His eyes are so pretty, and that smile he does when he's really happy and the way he runs in track and - "

"*Okay!*" Ivy laughed nervously, waving her hands to get Chloe to stop. "I don't need to know these things about my brother."

"Sorry."

"It's fine," Ivy smiled kindly, "it's just James is gross to me. You know what it's like with brothers."

"I do," Chloe shuddered, making the girls laugh.

"Have you thought about ignoring him?" Lisa offered. "Make him see what he's missing!"

Chloe pondered this, "I mean...I suppose I could *try*."

"Yeah," Ivy agreed. "Make yourself hard to get. Because James would be *very* lucky to get *you* Chloe. Remember that, okay?"

"I will," Chloe exhaled smiling bashfully. "Thanks girls."

"Aw come here," Lisa said, opening her arms up for the girls to all have a hug. They laughed at the awkward space of the bathroom and only pulled away when Lisa added, "okay I seriously need to pee so can this meeting be adjourned?"

"Absolutely," Ivy laughed pulling away, smiling ear to ear and thankful that she had such supportive girls in her life. Women should always lift one another up in Ivy's opinion, it only made them stronger, not weaker. They didn't need to compete, they were special in their own ways. Ivy just wished more girls felt that way.

"We should probably get going if we want to make those dinner reservations," Jen shouted over the chatter of the kitchen, looking down at the silver Rolex that Will had bought her for her birthday.

"Right you are Jen," Max said as she gulped down the last of her wine.

"Are you sure you're going to be okay holding down the fort here?" El asked, turning to Mike who had his arm around her.

"Of course!" Mike smiled, "everything is going to be fine. Just have fun tonight, and if you need anything let me know."

El looked up lovingly at Mike, sighing contently that she was lucky enough to call him her husband. It *had* been a long time since El had had a night out with the girls, especially with Max, and she intended to enjoy every moment. Sometimes she wanted to be *El* and not just *mom*.

"You look beautiful by the way," Mike whispered in her ear, smiling

against her skin. His warm breath sending goosebumps down her arms.

El grinned, looking up at her husband. "Pretty good?"

Mike beamed, shaking his head and clearly thinking of his 12 year old self. "I wish I had said breathtaking."

"That's okay," El smiled, adoration in her hazel eyes. "You make me feel breathtaking every day. Even when I finish work and dress like a slob and have my hair up and it looks like a bird's nest!"

Mike and El laughed, the same mental picture in both of their heads.

"But it doesn't matter," Mike admitted, nuzzling his nose against El's. "Because you are always beautiful. You always have been and you always will be. You've just got to accept I'm right."

El smirked, rolling her eyes. "But you know I like to be right."

"Well you're going to have to let this one go, because I'm not backing down," Mike teased, his eyes twinkling with mischief and love.

El huffed playfully but then smiled up at her husband, "I love you."

"I love you too. Now please kiss me." His teasing smile was soon obscured as El laughed and leaned up on her high heeled shoes to kiss her husband. Her arms wrapped around his neck and she felt his hands on her waist.

Naturally there was a hoard of groans from the kids and some of the adults and wolf whistles from Lucas and Max. But Mike and El only kissed longer just to annoy the crowd.

"I'm going to need therapy with those two as parents!" James's voice carried over.

"Aw just wait until you're in love James," Laura said to him. "You'll be the same way." That seemed to shut James up who had gone pink and battered Sam and Zach's sniggering jibes.

Mike and El eventually pulled away and leaned back holding hands

as they smiled at each other. "I look forward to you and I getting a night out together," Mike said with a heavy sigh, his lips still curved.

"Oh me too," El admitted, grinning ear to ear before looking at the room filled with parents. "Well we've got our pick of baby sitters for the next few weeks."

Mike hummed as he looked at all the parents, "I think I'd only trust Jen, Will and Laura."

"Hey! Why not me!" Max gasped, holding her hand to her chest in mock offence.

"Because you would charge us too much and insist that I order you food."

Max sniggered but didn't disagree with Mike's statement.

The house became loud and busy once more as the moms hugged their children, some resisting the embraces like Zach and James while Ivy and Ben were more than happy for El to give them a squeeze of affection.

Mike and Will waved off the women as Laura pulled out of the drive and turned to look at each other.

"Right so what's the plan now?" Will asked, already eyeing up the basement door where he knew the D&D game would take place.

Mike glanced at his watch before looking back up at his best friend. "Ivy, Ryan and Lisa should be leaving any minute, James has already gone upstairs with the boys or either that was just a stampede I heard and Ben, Seth and Logan are setting up extra chairs downstairs. So I suggest we grab a drink and some snacks and head down there."

"Sounds like a plan," Will grinned. "I've wanted to play D&D for ages!"

Mike patted Will's shoulder sympathetically and followed him back into the house, "don't we know it man."

Ivy hadn't expected leaving the Wheeler house for the party would be

easy, but man! It consisted of a talk from her dad about being careful; to not accept drinks from anyone, to not take drugs and the moment Lisa was distracted, he had added for her to not use her powers unless she was in a life or death situation.

"I know dad," Ivy had sighed, her eyes flickering around the room hoping no one else was listening in to her lecture.

Then Ryan had had a similar talk off Lucas who had been more lenient on him, except of course when it came to drinking considering he was the designated driver.

"Don't drink anything that's just handed to you," Lucas had told him, his arms crossed. "They might say it's none alcoholic but it could be spiked. So just stick to cans of soda or sealed bottles of water."

"Yeah I will do dad," Ryan had nodded in agreement, Ivy knew he was taking it sincerely because his jaw had tightened the way it always did when he was being serious.

Lucas had then asked to have a private word with Ryan and took him off for a moment. Ivy wasn't sure what had been said, but when he came back his hands were stuffed in his pockets and his cheeks were flushed in that cute way he got when he was embarrassed. Ivy couldn't help but smile at him, and when he caught her gaze she made a point of not looking away. He smiled back sheepishly and her heart soared.

They were ushered out of the house by the dads, Steve insisting he get a photo of the three teens ahead of their first high school party.

"Man I remember *my* first highschool party!" Steve choked as he snapped a few photos. Ivy stood in the middle of Lisa, her arms around both of their waist. She could feel the toned muscles of Ryan's torso through his shirt and tried to swallow the lump that built in her throat. Inappropriate thoughts flashed through her mind the same moment the camera light startled the teenagers.

"Good photo?" Steve asked, showing Ivy, Ryan and Lisa.

"Yeah really cool!" Lisa said nodding in approval.

"Yeah...totally," Ivy choked, wishing the moment she was thinking of Ryan with his shirt off didn't have to be recorded in a still image.

"You look distracted," Ryan laughed leaning over Ivy to look at the photo. She tried to hide the shiver that went down her spine at his closeness.

"That's just my face," Ivy teased, glad they were outside and that the darkening evening hid most of the blush of her cheeks.

Ryan grinned, unlocking the car. "No I *know* your face. And that was definitely your distracted face."

Ivy snorted, "stalker much? *'I know your face!'*"

She had meant it as a joke, to hide her own embarrassment but it only seemed to heighten Ryan's. Wishing she hadn't said anything, Ivy hurried to get into the passenger seat, not missing the smirk Lisa gave her before getting into the back seat of the chevrolet.

"Make sure to send me some snapchats!" Steve shouted.

"Don't drink too much Ivy!" Dustin chuckled.

"Shut up Dustin," Mike scolded his friend before waving at the teens, "have fun guys! Call me if you need anything! I'll have my phone by my side the whole evening!"

"Okay dad!" Ivy shouted back from the passenger side as she closed the car door and waved at the dads watching them. She smiled at them as Ryan started to reverse and spoke under her breath while still waving. "You would think it was our first day of school or something."

Ryan and Lisa sniggered and joined in the waving before Ryan put the car in drive and concentrated on the journey while Ivy put the sat nav details into the car's flat screen.

"This is nice," Lisa commented looking around at the clean car. "What is it?"

Ryan smiled, keeping his focus on the road. "It's a Chevrolet cruze. It's

my grandad's car. He let us borrow it because we obviously don't have a car here. But it's pretty new, he's only had it a few months."

"Wow, he's got a lot of trust in you!" Ivy teased as she now moved onto finding the radio channels.

"I know right," Ryan laughed, a flicker of nerves in his voice.

"Well we can park it around the block from Kimberley's," Lisa said, nodding to herself as she once again admired the car. "You don't want any of the losers from school puking on it or making out on it."

"That's a good idea actually," Ivy agreed.

"What, making out on it? Or parking it around the block?" Lisa teased her best friend who went immediately pink.

"No! I...I meant parking it around the block *obviously*."

Ivy was thankful that Ryan kept a dignified silence and just kept his eyes on the road, although she couldn't deny she could see a slight twitch of humour curving his lips. She glared at him for a moment and then continued to look through the radio channels until she found a good one.

'*Don't You Worry Child*' by Swedish House Mafia began to play and the three teens whooped and cheered.

"Yes!" Lisa said, already moving her shoulders to the music. "*This is how you get a party started!*"

They sang along, turning the music up loud as they travelled the short distance to Kimberley's Kelly's house.

"Upon a hill across a blue lake! That's where I had my first heartbreak! I still remember how it changed! My father said!" The teens sang, laughing as they tried to raise their voices. "Don't you worry, don't you worry child! See heaven's got a plan for you! Don't you worry, don't you worry now! Yeah!"

The rest of the journey went by quickly, the teens cheering when the next club music came on and hissing when the station would go to

commercials. Lisa filled in those gaps by telling Ryan about her crush on Kimberley.

"See I don't know if she's gay, so tonight my strategy is to see how she reacts around everyone and if she flirts with any guys."

"What if she *does* flirt with guys?" Ryan asked, frowning slightly. Ivy could tell from the look on his face that he too didn't want to see Lisa get hurt.

The blonde shrugged her shoulders, "then I just move on. But you never know, sometimes you don't know you're gay until you actually *have* an experience."

"How did um..." Ryan coughed and shook his head. "Sorry, it's none of my business. It's personal."

"No, no, it's fine," Lisa waved him off casually, shuffling forward slightly in her seat. "I think I've always known I was more attracted to girls but you know, living in a small town I tried to tell myself that I *did* like guys. It would be *easier* that way then getting the ridicule of asswipes in school."

Lisa sighed, "but like when I was fifteen I was paired with this guy Joel for our english project and we ended up making out. And yeah... it just felt *wrong*. I didn't like it at all."

"Have you um...kissed a girl?" Ryan asked, clearly hoping not to overstep the mark.

"I kissed a girl and I liked it!" Lisa sang, Ivy laughed and joined in. "The taste of her cherry chapstick!"

"Sorry," Lisa grinned while Ivy and Ryan laughed. "Yes I did. Last year I was a counsellor at summer camp and had a bit of a relationship with one of the other counsellors Camila. It was really nice."

"Do you two still talk?" Ivy asked, turning in her seat to look at Lisa.

"Not as much as we did," Lisa admitted, looking distracted for a moment. "Sometimes it just doesn't work out. I don't think she was

ready to come out. It's difficult, but no one else can tell you when it's your time to tell your truth."

"I'm proud of you," Ivy beamed, reaching her hand back to Lisa's and giving it a gentle squeeze.

"I'm proud of you too," Ryan added, glancing back only for a second to smile at Lisa before his focus went back to the open road. "It can't have been easy to come out."

"Probably the hardest thing I've ever done," Lisa exhaled, shaking her head as she remembered that period of time. It *had* been hard. Ivy remembered that Lisa's parents, her mom especially, weren't very supportive to begin with. It had taken them time to adjust but she was thankful they had finally come round. Nothing had changed of course, Lisa would always be Lisa, Ivy's best girl friend and soul sister.

The journey only took another five minutes before Ryan was slowly pulling up to the curb a block away from the party. They could see it in the distance though and the booming of the bass from the sound system seemed to pull them closer.

"You ready?" Ivy asked Ryan breathlessly as she unbuckled her seat belt and looked over at him.

He grinned at her, his eyes bright as he nodded. "Let's do this."

"Right, let's do this!" Mike said, clapping his hands together in excitement as he looked around the large table that Ben had set out. His son was sitting next to him, in full costume with his dungeon master's guide close to his face. They had all dressed up, well the kids had, and the adults had just picked whatever fit from the costume box.

Mike had on a chest plate of armour to represent his Paladin character, Will had on his original Will the Wise hat and was using his costume as a cape as he admitted it was now too small, no matter how much he had tried to make it fit.

Lucas had put on a hood which Mike was sure was from a *Scream* costume and held a plastic bow and arrow while Dustin had on elfen ears and was holding James's acoustic guitar and pretending it was a canaith mandolin, one of the many instruments a bard could use to their advantage.

And Steve...well Mike had no idea what Steve was. He said he was a rogue because it sounded "awesome" but his plastic tiara that Mike knew was from one of Ivy's old costumes and a fake beard that was *definitely* from a Halloween costume of Hagrid just didn't add up. But the kids seemed to think it was hilarious, so Mike let it slide.

Ben cleared his throat and sat up, looking around the table seriously. "And so we begin our campaign, Quest to the Dragon Queen!"

There was ooh's and gasps from everyone around the table, even Steve who seemed to be enjoying the atmosphere. Mike couldn't help but beam with pride as his son started to paint the picture for them all, bringing them into his imagination and making it feel so real.

"The Cult of the Dragon has been creating undead dragons in the fight against the Sword Coast for centuries. But Severin Silrajin, the new leader of the cult believes that *real* draconic power belongs with living dragons. His ambition is to find the five dragon masks, one for each dragon colour. Individually, these ancient masks allow wearers to communicate with dragons. More importantly, a person who is erudite in draconic lore becomes a wyrmspeaker while wearing the mask, which allows the wearer to think like a dragon, gain favor among dragons, and subtly influence their behavior. When all five are brought together, they magically merge into a single Mask of the Dragon Queen. With the assembled mask, the cult can release Tiamat from her prison in the Nine Hells!"

"Oh man this sounds awesome!" Dustin grinned, rubbing his hands together, almost knocking the guitar off his knee.

"So cool Ben!" Logan grinned, Seth nodding his head enthusiastically in agreement.

"This'll be a piece of cake," Steve smirked, looking down at the board.

"Oh really?" Lucas asked, raising his eyebrow.

"Yeah I've got experience with dragons," Steve said, his voice only slightly muffled by the fake beard he was wearing. "I watch Game of Thrones man!"

Mike rolled his eyes, "this is hardly the same..."

"Dude have you seen Daenerys?" Steve whispered to Dustin, both men sniggering and wiggling their eyebrows while Mike rolled his eyes and huffed out a breath.

"Let's get back to the game, or we'll kick you out of the party Steve."

"Fine I'll behave," Steve smirked, picking up his character sheet and bowing his head slightly to Ben to continue.

The campaign was full of action and the room soon filled with excitement as the men and boys tried to choose their best attacks. Steve was hopeless and Mike begrudgingly giving him a potion that revived his character to full health. But they were all having a good time and Ben was an excellent dungeon master, he kept the pace and suspense up and Mike didn't think he could be more proud of his little boy if he tried.

D&D was their thing, their joint hobby and love. And while Mike hoped Ben would always love the game just like his dad, he knew there might come a day when he didn't want to play. So Mike would enjoy the moment with his son and his friends. Knowing this would be one of those memories that never faded, because it was special. It meant the world to Mike.

James was trying to act normal. He was *really* trying but something was just...off. And he hated to admit it was Chloe. And worse than that, he *hated* that he seemed to be the only one who had noticed.

While the boys were playing *Call of Duty*, Chloe was sitting on James's bed flickering through a *Cosmo* magazine. She had been in his bedroom many times before considering they had all grown up together. But she had never been this *comfortable*. Usually she would

be looking at all of his stuff, asking where toys were from, what game was his favourite, if the colour blue of his bedroom walls was his favourite shade of blue. It usually got highly annoying, very quickly.

But now she was just... *quiet*. She had barely looked at him since they had all come upstairs and seemed content just reading her magazine. James wasn't used to this and could swear she was purposely ignoring him and he didn't know how to feel about that. Shouldn't he be happy?

"Why are you reading *Cosmo*?" He couldn't help but ask, turning his attention onto her and waiting to see if she was going to look at him. But she merely shrugged, keeping her eyes on the glossy magazine.

"Isn't it like porn for women or something?" James goaded her further, knowing she would have to respond to *that*.

"Well I found it in your sister's bedroom so..."

Sam and Zach burst out laughing and James went bright red, unsure if it was from Chloe's words or the way she *still* hadn't even looked up at him.

"James!" Sam scolded, "stop getting distracted man, we need you!"

James huffed, turning away from Chloe and trying to get back into the game, his character hiding behind a bust up vehicle.

"We've got this tonight," Zach grinned, nodding with confidence. "We are on *fire*! Oh shit, I'm dead."

"Look!" Sam sniggered, "your character is actually *on fire*!"

"Shut up," Zach huffed, crossing his arms and watching James and Sam carry on the game.

They played for a lot longer than usual, and James was convinced they could actually win this campaign when his character was hit with a grenade. "Damnit!"

Sam lasted only a few minutes more, but perhaps it was the shouts

from James and Zach telling him which direction to go that eventually put him off and he died too. "I blame you guys for that!" He shouted, turning to glare at his best friends.

"Hey! We were all better than we've been in a *long* time!" Zach interjected defending his honour.

A snort of laughter came from Chloe and the three boys turned their heads to look at her. She still didn't look up and it infuriated James.

"Do you think you could do a better job?" He offered, holding out the controller to her. "Because be my guest!"

She *finally* looked at him, her eyebrow raised. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"It's alright if you die Chloe," Sam said, waving off her concern.

"Yeah, you're just lucky Bieblove isn't playing tonight. He would kick your ass." Zach said wisely.

"Oh *really*?" Chloe asked in amusement, her lips curving into a smirk.

James rolled his eyes in annoyance, "yeah I know it's a rubbish username but they are actually pretty good and would kick your ass. So Zach's right, you *are* lucky."

Chloe looked mildly offended but after a moment of staring at James and seeing the challenge in his eyes, she put down the magazine and muttered, "fine."

James grinned in triumph sharing a secret glance between the boys, wondering how many minutes Chloe would last before she was knocked out. He knew that putting her in the game was literally a suicide mission in their attempts of winning the round, but it would be worth it to show her how hard it actually was.

Chloe looked down at the controller James passed her and frowned, her lips pouted slightly again. "Which button does what?"

Sam chuckled and leaned over telling her which buttons to use while James and Zach smirked at each other in amusement. This would be

a quick round.

"You want to play this round?" Sam asked, offering his own controller to James who shook his head.

"Nah man, I'm good to sit this one out." The truth was he wanted to watch Chloe. He didn't know why, he supposed it was because it would be funny to see how quickly her character died. Yeah... that was probably the reason.

"Okay here we go!" Zach said bracingly himself, crossing his legs and staring at the screen.

"Go! Go! Go!" Sam shouted with a big grin on his face as his character killed the opposing team's character and then stole the tank he had been driving. It would have been cool if James was watching, but his concentration was stuck on Chloe and her own game play.

His eyes flickered from the screen to the way Chloe speedily used her controller like she was an expert. Her character was everywhere and then seemed to be able to find the best hiding places before being in the right place to attack the opposing team. She killed one, then another, then another...

James knew his jaw had dropped but he couldn't help it or shut his mouth if he tried. Chloe was *fantastic*. It was like this game play came natural to her and James's assumption that the game would be quick came true. Only it wasn't because they sucked. No, it was because *Chloe* had kicked ass.

Wow was all James could think as he continued to stare at her, this time Sam and Zach joining in. All of them too shocked to speak.

Chloe sighed, putting the controller on the floor and getting to her feet. She didn't look at any of them as she headed to the door. "I'm getting a drink. Any of you guys want anything?"

"No...we're good thanks." Sam croaked out, the three boys watching Chloe leaving the room before turning to look at each other. Their awed eyes wide and perplexed.

"She's got to be Bieblove," Zach said in a hushed voice. "She's just got

to be."

"No it can't be her," James choked out, shaking his head adamantly.

"Dude it could *totally* be Chloe!" Sam gasped, looking back at the closed bedroom door.

"No it can't be her," James said, stumbling to his feet. "S-She's *Chloe!* She's annoying and loves Justin Bieb - Oh my god she could be *Bieblove!*"

"We *told* you!" Sam shouted, also getting up, Zach who felt left out quickly joined them, almost tripping as he sprang to his feet.

"What do we do? Confront her?" James asked, running a hand through his hair as he looked between his best friends, suddenly feeling sick with nerves.

"Well obviously!" Zach implored.

"Wait!" Sam said, starting to pace the room. "What if we do like a proper investigation. We could appear at her house when we know *Bieblove* is online and um...sneak up to her room and catch her in the act!"

James crossed his slim arms and cringed, "I don't know man, that sounds kind of stalkerish."

"Well do you *really* want to know if *Chloe* is *Bieblove*!?" Sam asked dramatically, his eyes wide as he stopped pacing to face James who was battling with more than the potential news about *Chloe* being their enemy of *Call of Duty*. Just seeing her play so passionately had awoken something in him that he was struggling to shut up.

"I mean..." James began, shuffling from one foot to the other. On the one hand it felt kind of wrong to catch *Chloe* out. Surely if she *was* *Bieblove* then she had the right to tell the boys when she wanted to. But then James remembered how she had pretended to not even know what the controls were and he frowned deep in thought. There was clearly more to this. Why *was* she playing *Call of Duty* in the first place? Why hadn't she told them? Was she playing just to impress them?

All James knew was that he needed an answer and he wanted to know more about Chloe. He wanted to know why his stomach twisted in knots every time she was around. Was it repulsion? Or was it something a lot more complicated than that?

"Yeah," James said looking at Zach and Sam in turn. "Let's investigate her."

El, Max, Jen and Laura entered Enzo's Italian restaurant, their heels clicking against the dark wooden floors as they gathered by the entrance, waiting for the host.

"Oh wow," Max said, her blue eyes flickering around the room. "They have certainly jazzed up this place."

Enzo's had been very popular in Hawkins during the 80's and early 90's, but had soon gone downhill when the owner had passed away and there had been a family dispute over who would take over the business.

"It got refurbished only a few months ago," Laura said as she shrugged off her coat.

"It's nice to have an Italian restaurant again," Jen admitted with a laugh, El nodding her head in agreement.

"You see, this is when living in a city really works out. You want pizza at 2am? You want waffles at 4am? No problem. There's just so much *choice*." Max teased quietly as they watched the smart looking host walk their way.

"I can still have waffles at 4am," El reasoned. "I just need a toaster, a box of Eggos and usually Mike."

"Good evening ladies," the host greeted them, a polite smile on his face as he moved towards his post. "Do you have a reservation?"

"Yes, El Wheeler, party of four for 7pm."

His eyes scrolled down his list and he nodded, "ah yes El Wheeler. Please follow me." He picked up four menus and headed towards the

windows which were lit up with string lights. The ambience of the restaurant was warm and romantic. White cloths strung over tables with tea light candles on top and delicate flowers in thin vases.

Once the host had pulled out the chairs for the group and placed their menus in front of them, he was whisked away to deal with the next party awaiting their seats.

"I feel so posh!" Max gasped, imitating a British accent and making the girls laugh.

"Don't worry, it might *seem* posh, but they've got all the usual dishes." El grinned as she looked through her menu.

"Should we order some drinks?" Jen asked, wiggling her eyebrows as she pointed a finger to the alcohol list.

"Are we going to be embarrassing moms tonight?" El grinned as she looked at the cocktails.

"Probably," Max, Jen and Laura said in unison before all laughing once more.

Once the waiter had been and gone with their drinks and food order, the girls all lifted their gin, cocktails and in Laura's case mocktail glass and toasted to one another. The clink of glass made El smile, it had been *way* too long since she had a girls night out.

"Here's to the MILFS," Max teased, raising her glass of strawberry and lemonade gin high. "May we be young again and have fun!"

"And not embarrass our kids," Jen added before snorting, "okay maybe just a little."

"Cheers!"

They all took a drink, discussing which was the best one and what they would order next. They talked about work, how things had changed in Hawkins and what life was like in San Diego for Max.

"I bet you miss that beautiful beach," Laura sighed, sipping from her mocktail with a dreamy look on her face.

"I do," Max admitted with a smile, "but I love my time up here with you all. I miss you girls a lot...but California is definitely my home."

"I think Ivy might go to California," El said, speaking the thoughts that swirled around her head.

"You think?" Jen asked before thanking the waiter who was now bringing out their appetisers.

El nodded, "I think she wants to go to Stanford like Mike did. Or maybe even San Diego depending on what is happening with Ryan..."

"Yes what is happening with Ryan and Ivy?" Laura asked, leaning in closer as she sunk her spoon into her tomato and basil soup.

Max and El looked at one another as if to check they were both on the same page before Max spoke. "Well they aren't together as far as we are aware. Ryan makes it very obvious that he wishes they *were* together though. I think he's loved her since they were little."

"It's the same with Ivy," El sighed. "Just the look on her face every time she sees him just says it all."

"Is it like the face you and Mike used to make when you were teenagers?" Jen giggled, already feeling a bit giddy from the alcohol.

Max laughed, "they *still* make that face Jen!"

"True."

El grinned, rolling her eyes in amusement. "I suppose it *is* like that face then." She bit into her bruschetta and for a moment there was comfortable silence as they all ate and drank. El thought about her daughter and wondered if she did feel the same way about Ryan that El felt about Mike.

While it was a beautiful thought and it made El so happy to know that her daughter had found *her one*, she also knew the agony that Ivy and Ryan would experience if something did start up between them while they were living at such a distance. It would be heartbreakingly difficult for them both, and probably one of the hardest things

they would have to live through. But El knew that if they could make it, then nothing could separate them.

The evening seemed to get away with the moms, they laughed, ate pasta and then shared a colossal brownie sundae which they all *insisted* they would never finish but eventually dropped their chocolate covered spoons into the empty glass.

"Aw I don't want this evening to end," Jen pouted, probably the most drunk out of them all, closely followed by El who was being piggybacked out of the restaurant by Max. Laura helped Jen onto the pavement and looked across the road.

"Well there's Franky's bar over there," Laura suggested, struggling with Jen who was looking in the wrong direction. "They've got karaoke and - "

"Karaoke?!" Max squealed. "Say no more!"

Laura made sure the road was clear before letting the women cross the road. "Remember I'm off duty tonight girls! I don't want any accidents."

"Yes Dr Henderson!" El laughed before shrieking, "my shoe!" as her high heel slipped off into the road.

Max giggled, and continued to walk. "You can borrow one of mine and we can be like the limp sisters." El found Max's joke way too funny, bursting out into a fit of giggles while Laura smirked and picked up the fallen shoe, tucking it under her free arm.

The four girls walked into the bar and looked around at the space in front of them. The sign was missing some of its lights, the carpet had seen better days and the old men sat on the corner of the bar looked incredibly surprised that four newcomers had come in, especially women.

El looked up at the worn karaoke machine and grinned, "yes. This is the place."

Max turned to the confused looking bartender and pointed at him and the other men at the bar, "you boys are about to see something

special!"

Laura put their things in one of the booths while Max and El tried to get the karaoke machine working and Jen bought a round of drinks.

"Aren't you Hopper's daughter?" one of the men asked, watching El with bewilderment.

"Yep," she smiled proudly, "but don't tell him I was here. He'll ground me."

"He probably would," Max sniggered as she finally got the machine to work and scrolled through. "Wow there's some old music on here, but some *classics!*"

"That one!" El squealed pointing to an *ABBA* tune. "Have you got any more microphones?" she added looking at the bartender who had merely been watching the girls with a puzzled expression on his face.

"Er..." he said, wiping his hands on his apron and looking under the bar. "Somewhere I think..."

When Franky had finally found the extra microphones, El, Max and Jen started to sing. Laura was a little more shy, probably because she was sober, but the girls eventually pulled her in after numerous attempts.

"You can dance! You can jive! Having the time of your life! Ooh, see that girl, watch that scene, diggin' the dancing queen!"

Franky located his old disco ball, a smile on his face as he nodded to the music and hung up the shimmering light, happy to see his bar lively once more.

The older men at the bar, Tony and Lennon started tapping their feet to the music and clapping for the girls, laughing at the strange turn of events.

"You are the dancing queen! Young and sweet, only seventeen!" Max sang, dancing around the microphone lead.

"Dancing queen, feel the beat from the tambourine, oh yeah!" El

joined in, hitting the worn leather seat like it was a musical instrument.

"Come on guys!" Jen ushered to the men who looked at one other, pink faced and shaking their heads adamantly.

"You can dance, you can jive, having the time of your life! Ooh see that girl, watch that scene, diggin' the dancing queen!"

El grabbed Lennon's hand and Max pulled Tony onto the makeshift dance floor. The men laughed and joined in best they could.

They all danced the night away, Lennon choosing a song next and then Tony, before more people started to walk into the bar, probably from hearing all the singing and laughter. Franky couldn't believe his eyes as he started to take in more sales then he could remember.

The girls formed a circle and put their arms around each other as they giggled and sang, sweaty and dizzy and feeling more like their teenage selves then they had in a long time.

"Best sober night out ever!" Laura shouted, laughing as she was engulfed in hugs by El, Max and Jen.

Ryan was surprised by how big Kimberley Kelly's house was as the three teens walked up the path that was already filled with teenagers. There looked like there was a keg stand going on just by the side of the house where a load of jocks were surrounded and cheering, other teenagers were chatting avidly, holding red plastic cups while a few were sneaking off, usually couples with mischievous looks on their faces.

As they approached the front door Ryan could hear more clearly the new Robin Thicke song *Blurred Lines* and he tapped his fingers on his jeans. He loved a good beat and actually *enjoyed* dancing. But that was usually just for family parties, not high school parties where he could be ridiculed.

"Oh we are totally getting you to dance!" Ivy called back, smiling over her shoulder at him and making Ryan think she was reading his

thoughts. *I mean, I'm sure she could if she really wanted to!*

The house was crowded as Lisa tried to lead the way to the kitchen suggesting that they got a drink before anything else. Ryan was pushed forward slightly by another group and bumped into Ivy, holding onto her hips for a moment to stop her falling.

"Sorry," he cringed, his skin prickling with heat from a mixture of embarrassment and a rush of desire at touching her body. Even if it was just her waist, he couldn't deny that he was madly attracted to her.

"That's okay," Ivy said breathlessly in response, looking just as flushed with colour as Ryan felt.

They entered the large kitchen area which was alive with laughter and dancing while people lined up for the punch or took snacks from the food that had been laid out.

"There's Kim," Lisa whispered to Ivy and Ryan before waving over the hostess. "Hey Kim!"

Kim turned from where she was handing out some vodka jello shots and smiled at the group, "hey girls, glad you could make it, want a jello shot?"

While Ivy and Lisa thanked her and took one each, Kim's green eyes moved onto Ryan and for a moment she seemed surprised before her red lips curved into a sweet smile. "Ah, so are *you* Ivy's friend then?"

Ryan didn't know whether to smile or not. This girl seemed to be treating him kindly but he didn't like being addressed as just Ivy's *friend* when he wanted to be so much more than that. He knew he was being stupid. He *wasn't* Ivy's boyfriend and he wasn't going to be if he didn't do something about it.

"Yeah, I'm Ryan," he said, giving her a smile and raised his hand in greeting.

"Nice to meet you Ryan," Kim grinned before looking down at her tray. "Would you like a jello shot?"

"Oh no thanks, I'm the designated driver."

"Oh," Kim said looking slightly disappointed. "That's really responsible of you."

Ryan smiled and looked at Lisa and Ivy, "well someone's got to make sure these two get home okay."

"Aw you're such a gentleman," Kim grinned at him before sighing and looking around at her filled home. "Well I suppose I best get back to my duties. Nice to meet you Ryan. I hope I get to see you later."

"You too," he said politely, turning back to Lisa and Ivy and not noticing the way Kim glanced back at him with a smile. He also didn't notice at first how the tension in the air had become tense.

"So..." Lisa laughed uncomfortably, her eyebrows raised in surprise. "I think we can safely say that Kim is straight."

Ryan frowned in confusion, "how do you know?"

"Because she was all over you," Ivy muttered, not looking at him as she headed towards the punch queue. Ryan watched her go with surprise, feeling hurt. He opened his mouth to speak and shut it again before looking at Lisa.

"Was she really all over me?"

Lisa clenched her teeth and shrugged, "I mean...she was definitely flirting with you."

Ryan laughed, shaking his head. "Surely Ivy knows - "

"Ivy knows what?" Lisa persisted, her eyes widening eagerly.

Ryan blushed and looked away, "um...nothing. Should we get a drink?"

Lisa sighed, pushing Ryan towards the queue where Ivy stood with her arms crossed. "Honestly you two," she muttered under her breath.

Ryan stood behind Ivy trying to process what had just happened and

her reaction to Kim's supposed 'flirting'. No matter how many times he ran it through his head, only one question kept coming back to him. *Was she jealous?*

He couldn't stop the smile that spread to his lips and he tried to contain it. Was it possible that her current stern composure and crossed arms were her being annoyed about him being flirted with by someone else?

"What are you smirking about?" Ivy suddenly asked, her voice stiff and annoyed, as she side eyed Ryan.

So now she's watching me too. The thought only made Ryan smile even more and he just shrugged at Ivy. "I was just thinking that you resembled Neville Longbottom when he's petrified by Hermione."

Ivy turned around in shock and Ryan tried to stand up tall and look serious, although his wavering smile was making it obvious he was minutes away from bursting with laughter. He mimicked Neville in his frozen state while Ivy swiped at him with her hands, making him lose the ability to be serious and laugh loudly.

"You're such," Ivy began as she tickled Ryan's sides knowing it would make him jump, "an idiot!"

"Hey I'm not the one who was acting all jealous," Ryan teased, pulling his tongue playfully at Ivy as she continued to swat him with her hands. "I am allowed more than one friend you know!"

"Oh shut it you," Ivy smirked, the tension between them finally drifting away as they relaxed back into their comfortable atmosphere. "Face it, I'm the *best* friend you're ever gonna have."

Ryan smiled, his eyes filling with warmth as he admired the girl he loved. "I'm not denying it."

Ivy looked at him, her amber eyes bright and sparkling as she grinned. She didn't need to say anything in that moment and stepped forward in the queue while Lisa muttered that they should just get it over with and get married already.

Ivy couldn't stop smiling and was thankful that Ryan was standing behind her and couldn't see the permanent happy curve of her lips that he had caused. Yes she admitted that when Kim had been flirting with Ryan she had felt jealousy surging up inside of her like one of the dragons in D&D ready to breathe fire and wreak havoc.

Her emotions had felt completely out of control. She wanted to be better than the stereotypical jealous girl, but in that moment it had just got too much. But Ivy couldn't help but be thankful that Ryan didn't allow it to go any further. He knew her inside out. He knew she was mad, no matter what he thought the reason was for it, he *still* managed to make her smile and laugh. He made everything better. His force of light would help her out of any darkness, no matter how lost she became.

Finally the space opened up to the punch bowl and Ivy and Lisa stepped up to it while Ryan grabbed a can of soda. Ivy looked into the orange bowl and hummed.

"So what do you reckon is in that?"

"Pure fuel," Lisa laughed. "Well that's what they used to say back in the day anyway."

"Maybe just try a little bit and see what you think?" Ryan suggested, cracking open his can while Lisa and Ivy picked up two red cups.

"Okay," Ivy breathed with a nervous smile as she collected a small amount of the drink to taste. Once Lisa had done the same, the girls toasted and downed the contents.

Lisa cringed, shaking her head. "Nope, not for me. Think I'll try something else."

Ivy shrugged, wiping at her mouth. "I don't think it's that bad. It's quite fruity." She helped herself to another one, this time filling her cup.

"Right," Lisa exhaled looking around the room, her interest rising in the party now. "Let's start this party!"

The trio wandered into the living area which seemed to be the main

hub of the party. The sound system was beating out the music and the sofas had been pushed back against the walls to create a make-shift dance floor in the centre. In the corner there seemed to be a game of beer pong going on and a few other drinking games.

"What do you want to do?" Ryan shouted into Ivy's ear as the music changed to *Gangnam Style* and everyone cheered, gathering on the dance floor. Ivy laughed, not having to say what they would be doing as they quickly joined the other teens in dancing, doing all of the iconic moves.

Ryan's moves were clearly superior, he had also been a great dancer and Ivy joined in with the clapping and cheering for him as he showed them all how it was done.

"Who is that?!" Lauren Peters, one of Kim's best friends, asked Lisa.

"Ryan!" Lisa shouted back as she smiled watching Ivy joining in the dance with Ryan why he showed her the moves.

"Is he single?!"

Lisa turned back to Lauren in surprise and then shook her head. "No. Him and Ivy kind of have a thing. In fact, will you tell Kim too?"

Lauren smiled and nodded, "no problem."

Rihanna's *We Found Love* came on next as Ivy downed the rest of her drink and put the cup on a table, grabbing Ryan and Lisa's hands as they all danced. Ryan took it in turns spinning both girls before Lisa shouted over the beat that she would get them all another drink.

Ivy was feeling the effects of the alcohol and it made her feel lighter on her feet as she jumped up and down to the beat with Ryan, holding his hands and flinging her hair side to side as they laughed.

It seemed like they danced the night away. Lisa came back with drinks, making sure Ivy also had a bottle of water so she didn't get dehydrated. They all played beer pong, Ryan was on Ivy's team so he didn't have to drink but he tried to advise her on throwing the ping pong ball, which she mainly laughed at and ignored, making him grin and shake his head.

After a while Lisa snuck away from Ryan and Ivy, staying in sight but trying to give them some space. She ended up on the sofa happily chatting away with Lauren, occasionally checking up on the couple. They were either doing something stupid like, Ryan spinning Ivy around at her request or dancing like no one was watching.

Ryan had no idea what time it was, all he knew was that Ivy had discarded her heels with Lisa hours earlier as she complained they were too uncomfortable to dance in. After she still had the same complaint, Ryan suggested they go out onto the cold patio which was separate from the pool area and so not as busy.

He had an ulterior motive of course. They were having so much fun, he could *feel* the electricity between them and he just felt like this could be the moment that he told her, *finally*, that he was in love with her. That he wanted them to be together more than anything and he hoped she felt the same way.

"Ooh it's cold on my feet," Ivy whispered as they stepped out onto the patio. Ryan held her hand, leading her way.

"Yeah I thought it might be good for them," Ryan smiled, looking back at Ivy. "All that dancing in those heels probably isn't great."

"Okay doctor," Ivy snorted, her balance only slightly off as they walked away from the pool and the majority of the party goers.

"Hey!" Ryan gasped in mock offence. "I'm just trying to get you back to your parents in one piece. Otherwise your dad might not let us go out again."

Ivy smirked, shaking her head. "We're like Romeo and Juliet!"

Ryan laughed, not sure she currently realised what those titles entailed but not disagreeing with her. She was always right after all.

"It's so pretty by here," Ivy sighed looking around at the space. Ryan wasn't entirely sure he agreed, considering it was just a section of patio mainly covered by some hedges. But when he looked at Ivy, how she twirled around the space, he couldn't help but smile, his

heart beginning to race.

"It's beautiful here."

Ryan let go off Ivy's hand as she started to inspect the area, poking her fingers at the foliage of the hedges in curiosity. Ryan shuffled from foot to foot, trying to control his breathing with deep exhales, but it was no use. He had never felt more nervous in his entire life.

"Ivy?" he croaked out, immediately trying to clear his throat so he didn't sound quite as weak as he felt.

"Yes?" Ivy said, turning around to look at him. Her eyes were slightly dazed, her skin huey from the sweat of dancing and her hair was slightly frazzled but god was she beautiful.

"I...um...I..."

"Ooh Ryan listen!" Ivy interrupted Ryan's stutters, her eyes widening as she stood still for a moment, listening to the next song that had started to play in the house. It wasn't as loud as it had been inside of course, but Ryan could hear it clearly.

"It's um... *Without You* isn't it?"

"Yes," Ivy nodded, closing her eyes and exhaling a deep breath. "By David Guetta. I *love* this song." She opened her eyes and smiled shyly, "it makes me think of you."

"It does?" Ryan asked, distracted from spilling his heart out.

"Yeah," Ivy nodded, slowly closing the space between them. "Can we dance?"

Ryan hesitated, really wanting to tell her how he felt but realising that maybe right now *wasn't* the moment. Ivy wasn't paralytic drunk, but she *was* drunk. And that wasn't how Ryan wanted to tell her how he felt for the first time.

"Of course we can," he smiled offering his hands out to her.

"No," Ivy said, shaking her head. Ryan's confusion only lasted a

second before he realised she wanted to slow dance. She raised her arms and wrapped them around his neck as he slowly moved his hands to her waist, his palms warm against her cool skin. He felt goosebumps rising up his arms and shuddered, trying not to make his accelerated breathing obvious.

Ivy leaned her head against his chest and for a moment Ryan froze, knowing that she could probably hear his pounding heart. He gulped and exhaled a shaky breath, closing his eyes and accepting the embrace, melting into it. They slowly swayed to the music, the warm evening breeze brushing against Ryan's skin as he lowered his head so his cheek rested against Ivy's sweet smelling hair.

He smiled, knowing there was nowhere else in the entire world that he wanted to be right now. He could wait to talk, he just wanted this moment.

"Any updates on the kids?" Lucas yawned, sitting at the kitchen island with a cup of coffee in front of him.

It was past midnight and the D&D game had ended half an hour ago. The campaign wasn't over of course, in fact the boys and men had already made arrangements to continue playing the next night.

Ben, Logan and Seth were all asleep in the basement, all opting to be there in their sleeping bags than in Ben's bedroom. Mike suspected it was *cooler* to sleep in the basement. Just like it had been when he was young.

Steve had taken Chloe home and James, Sam and Zach were asleep upstairs.

Mike, Will, Dustin and Lucas sat around the kitchen counter, waiting for the rest of the party to get home.

Mike checked his phone and nodded, "yeah Ryan messaged about twenty minutes ago that they had just dropped Lisa off, so they should be back any minute now."

"And our wives?" Will smiled, taking a sip of coffee.

Dustin laughed, "I spoke to Laura ten minutes ago and I *swear* I could hear El and Max singing in the background. But they shouldn't be too much longer either."

There was the sound of a car and the four dads all perked up. Mike got off the stool and walked towards the front of the house. He pulled the drapes back slightly, his eyes squinting to see who had returned. He recognised the car and realised it was Ryan and Ivy.

For a moment he couldn't see much until Ryan turned the light on in the car and Mike watched as the teenage boy seemed to gently nudge Ivy who was asleep in the passenger side. They appeared to have a few murmured words as Ivy slowly awoke and then Ryan got out, making his way over to Ivy's door and opening it for her.

Mike's lips twitched into a small smile as he noticed the teasing expression on Ivy's face before Ryan laughed, clearing giving in to something. He helped her out of the car, being so careful with her that it made Mike's chest fill with warmth.

He soon realised what the agreement must have been for Ivy to get out of the car, because Ryan lifted her up onto his back and she smiled contently, resting her chin on his shoulder as he grabbed her stuff and piggy backed her up to the house.

Mike hesitantly pulled away from the window and opened the front door for the teenagers. Not surprisingly, Ryan halted when he noticed Mike, specifically because he was still wearing a chest plate of armour from D&D and probably looked like he was going to challenge Ryan to a dual or something.

Mike laughed awkwardly, removing the costume and trying his best to smile at the teenagers, moving out of the way so that Ryan could bring Ivy in. "Well it looks like you guys had a good time!" he exclaimed, hoping he wasn't coming across too fatherly.

"It was the best daddy," Ivy sighed happily as Ryan carried her carefully in.

Mike could see she was clearly tipsy, but she was happy and she was *safe*. And that was all Mike had wanted. He smiled at the

teenagers and was glad to see that Ryan looked less tense now that he hadn't been ordered to drop Ivy.

Ivy yawned and snuggled into Ryan's neck, "can you take me upstairs please?"

Mike froze and it appeared Ryan did too. Both men stared at each other for a moment before Mike replayed the moments of gentleness and sweetness he had just seen between Ryan and Ivy. It reminded him of him and El and made something in his head click into place.

Ryan loved his daughter and he was never going to hurt her. Mike trusted him.

He nodded, "yeah take her up if you don't mind Ryan. I'll grab her a glass of water."

Ryan looked startled by Mike's words and blinked in surprise before finally finding his voice. "Um...yeah...okay. Thanks."

"No, thank you Ryan for looking out for her." Mike couldn't help but say, exhaling a relieved breath that their first party had gone so well. And he knew that Ryan would have been a big reason for that success.

"I always will," Ryan smiled softly, backing away slowly before turning and heading up the stairs carefully with Ivy.

Mike watched them go until he was distracted by bright lights and the sound of another car engine rumbling as the vehicle pulled up to the house.

"They're here!" Mike called to the men, who all scrambled off their chairs to greet their wives.

Laura got out first and looked at the men gathered in the doorway, "I might need a hand," she laughed before opening the back door of the car, the sound of drunk singing being clearly heard.

"Oh my," Will laughed as he hurried to help Jen who was stumbling out of the car.

Lucas, Mike and Dustin rushed forward to assist as well, Lucas shaking his head as Max continuously giggled in his ear about some dancing old men in the bar. "They were hilarious!"

"Well hello you," Mike grinned at El who was shuffling towards the door to get out of the car. He had known her for almost 30 years so could tell she was drunk in an instance.

"We had the best time!" El exclaimed, tripping over her shoes as she stumbled into Mike's arms. "The food was great, the karaoke was amazing! Oh Mike I sang eight songs on karaoke. First there was *Dancing Queen*, then Lennon wanted *Night Fever*. - "

"Who is Lennon?" Mike laughed, closing the car door and putting his arm around El to support her.

"Only her *best friend*!" Max shouted from the doorway while Lucas struggled to get her in the doorway because she was stumbling like a baby deer.

"He was so funny," El snorted, shaking her head.

"Okay..." Mike said, before frowning in distraction. "Are you wearing two *different* shoes?"

"Long story!" Laura called from inside the house.

"Oh Mrs Wheeler," Mike tutted playfully, realising this was the main reason El was struggling to walk. She squealed as he lifted her bridal style. "Let's get you in the house babe."

"Don't let anyone tell you you're not observant," El whispered into Mike's ear while he smiled, rolling his eyes in amusement. His grin soon vanished when El added in a groan, "I'm gonna be sick."

The night had certainly been eventful and not how Mike had suspected. It had been fun to play D&D with the boys, hell even with Steve. James and the guys seemed to have a good night, even Chloe left with a pleased smirk on her face!

There had been revelations too. Mike had realised how much Ryan cared for his daughter, and felt stupid for not *really* understanding it

sooner. She was in safe hands and maybe it was time he did let her follow her heart with no reservations.

And then of course there was the revelation that the moms were much more wild than the kids. Mike spent the rest of his evening pulling back El's hair while she threw up, helping her get dressed and into bed, getting Ivy a glass of water and then lying awake making sure El was okay while she slept soundly.

Mike was never going to stop worrying about his family, but he wouldn't want it any other way. Because there was no one that would love them and protect them like he would. So if his night was spent stroking through El's hair and watching her peaceful and beautiful in sleep, then was it really that bad? Because he loved her more than anything, and love was the best thing to live for.

Notes for the Chapter:

If you are reading this it means you made it to the end of this mammoth chapter! I can't say that the next chapter will be this long but there was a lot of content that I wanted to fit in here :-)

Now I don't usually beg for reviews, but if you do want to leave one, I would really, really appreciate it after 20 thousand words of grafting and using my entire weekend for this chapter! :-D It's just really nice to get feedback, it's like oxygen to a writer :-)

Credit to Wolfgang Baur and Steve Winter, creators of the D&D campaign that I based mine on. Their's is called Hoard of the Dragon Queen and sounds pretty damn good for those D&D players out there! I couldn't even imagine having that type of imagination to make a full on campaign!

Anyway I'm waffling on now! I hope you enjoyed chapter 4, please consider leaving a review and

thank you so much for reading :-) x

5. In Deep Water

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey guys! Wow it really has been a while hasn't it? I hope you are all doing well? I am sorry it has taken so long to get this chapter out to you. This past year and a half I have worked harder than I thought was possible, working in a hospital during the pandemic hasn't just been physically exhausting but mentally too. And even though I have had the best intentions to continue writing, I've barely made it past eating my dinner before I'm asleep! But I am trying my best to fight back and bring this story and the universe back. Truth is I miss it!

This chapter will seem short compared to some of my others, but I needed to just get back into it after being away so long. So I'm sorry if it's a bit rusty! Hopefully you can enjoy it for what it is :-) There is so much more to come with this story!

The Life We Deserve

Chapter 5 - In Deep Water

The water of the Hawkins Community Pool shone with a turquoise shimmer underneath the beating summer sun. Small waves were created as children and adults alike splashed and swam in the large pool.

The water was mainly occupied by members of the Wheeler, Harrington, Byers and Henderson families. Steve and Dustin were having a race on two inflatable water floats they had stolen off the twins. The image of the two grown men racing a Unicorn and

Flamingo would stick with Grace and Lily who insisted that the men now keep the floats.

James, Zach, Sam, Ben and Tyler Harrington were playing around the pool, as soon as the lifeguard was distracted, they dived into the water, doing cannonballs and splashing Will and Jen who were sitting on the edge of the swimming pool trying to eat their ice cream.

Laura and El were on sun loungers watching Steve and Dustin's race with amusement just as Mike climbed out of the pool and made his way over to the girls. His dark hair stuck to his eyelashes causing him to push it back, distracting El enough from the race to give her husband a cheeky eyebrow wiggle and smirk over his attractive form. He blushed but smiled smugly as he took the lounger next to his wife.

Mike dried himself off and started looking for the sun cream, but El beat him to it, wiggling the lotion to grab his attention. "I'll do your shoulders and back if you'd like?" she said sweetly, making Mike snort with laughter.

"As if I would ever deny you that privilege."

El grinned knowing that Mike was teasing, but she wasn't about to deny that she didn't mind massaging the cream into her husband's broad shoulders.

Mike sat on the edge of El's sun lounger and she shuffled closer to him, her legs either side of him as she started to smooth the coconut smelling cream into his pale warm skin.

Mike relaxed into her touch, his eyes closed and his lips curved into a smile as El's hands moved across his back and shoulders, the action not only soothing but intimate too. She took her time, her touch against his skin making Mike's heart race.

"Done," El grinned, pressing a kiss to his cheek.

Mike couldn't hide the disappointment in his sigh that applying the sun lotion hadn't taken that long. He looked over his shoulder at his wife and smiled, his eyes flickering over her beautiful face.

"We need a night out soon."

El smirked, leaning in to whisper in Mike's ear. "Don't you mean a night in? I'm sure the kids would be more than happy to stay over at their friends' houses..."

Mike raised his eyebrow, a mischievous glint in his eyes. "Sounds like a plan to me. Can we make it tonight?"

El laughed, winking at her husband. She settled back onto the lounger and watched as Mike covered his arms in the lotion and his chest. She frowned when he put the lotion away without putting any on his legs.

"You're going to get sunburnt," she commented as Mike lay on the sun bed next to her.

"No," he yawned, stretching out his tall body. "My legs never tan."

El rolled her eyes, putting her sunglasses on. "Whatever you say honey."

Ivy tapped her fingers on her thigh as she listened to her ipod, *Get Lucky* by Daft Punk and Pharrell Williams playing in her ears as she closed her eyes and felt the warm rays of the sun span across her skin.

With the funky music pulsing through her it was easy to drown out the sound of her brothers, family and friends playing in the water, shouting and laughing as they acted like children, while Ivy lay on a sun lounger trying to tan her pale skin.

It was two days since the party, and even though Ivy hadn't been that drunk it all felt such a blur. She remembered dancing, she remembered feeling jealous when Kimberley Kelly hit on Ryan. But more than anything, she couldn't stop thinking about what happened after the party.

Ivy couldn't stop giggling. The adrenaline still ran through her veins from a perfect night spent out with her best friends. She clung onto Ryan as he piggy backed her up the stairs and to her bedroom. Her

arms wrapped loosely around his neck as she nestled her chin on his broad shoulder and snorted with humour, the alcohol she had drunk that night still swirling through her veins.

"You're like the pony I always wanted!"

Ryan sniggered, shaking his head in amusement as he nudged Ivy's bedroom door open with his foot. "Neigh!" he teased making Ivy burst out laughing.

"Okay, okay," Ryan smiled, more entertained by Ivy's hyperness than anything else. "It wasn't that funny!"

"You're hilarious," Ivy grinned, still giggling to herself as Ryan stumbled over her discarded outfit choices for the party that still lay on the floor where she had left them.

"No," Ryan said, turning away from Ivy's bed so that he could lower her from his back and onto the mattress. "You are the hilarious one and you know it."

Ivy reluctantly let go of him and landed onto her duvet with only a slight bounce. Ryan turned to look at her and exhaled a deep breath, his warm eyes flickering slowly over her face. "I had a great time tonight."

Ivy couldn't stop smiling as she looked up at Ryan. The night had been wonderful and he was the reason. She wanted to tell him how she felt, but she knew this wasn't the moment. She was tired, her eyelids drooping; the lateness of the night, the comfort of her bed and the alcohol in her system making a perfect cocktail for a heavy sleep.

"Thank you for coming," Ivy sighed happily, her exhale becoming a yawn as she lowered herself properly onto her bed and nuzzled her face into the pillow, which she knew she would regret in the morning when it was imprinted with makeup.

Ryan grinned, and without a second thought, pulled the duvet up over Ivy's body, tucking the comforter around her. She could feel herself falling to sleep just as easily as she had fallen in love.

"Thank you for inviting me," he whispered, knowing that she was already drifting off.

She was barely conscious, but used the last of her energy to reach out for Ryan's hand. It felt so warm, so suited with her own, their fingers entwining like the perfect jigsaw piece.

"Thank you for being born," she slurred out before her tiredness swept her away.

Ivy frowned, reaching up to rub her temple as she tried to remember if she had simply dreamt something as embarrassing as thanking Ryan for being born, or if that had actually happened. Her cheeks blushed even at the thought of saying something so stupid to him.

Ryan hadn't said anything about it, but that didn't mean he wasn't just waiting for the right time to tease her. He could be like that sometimes. Ivy grabbed her phone, her heart racing slightly as she started to type out a message to him.

Ivy: When are you getting here?

She couldn't deny she was impatient to see him. The day after the party everyone seemed to be worse for wear and had pyjama day's with their respective families. Ivy hated to admit it, but she still enjoyed making a blanket fort in the living room with her brothers and parents, slobbing out and watching movies. Yesterday had been a Disney marathon, which James had complained about, but Ivy still caught him laughing at Maximus the horse from *Tangled*.

Ivy's phone vibrated, pulling her back to reality as she hurried to view the message.

Ryan: Soon 🤪

Ivy couldn't help but roll her eyes and huffed out an exasperated breath as she quickly typed a response.

Ivy: When is soon?!

Ryan: Webster's defines soon as 'in a prompt manner'.

Ivy: Define asshole.

Ryan: Do you really want me to define that? 🤪

Ivy:□

Ryan: 🍔 My mom is on a two day hangover, so everyone's moving a little slowly. But don't worry, we're bringing lunch if that's what you're concerned about 😊

Ivy hesitated, wanting to say 'it's not the food I'm waiting for' but stopped herself. Heat prickled at her skin as she thought about how close she was to telling Ryan how she felt. It was a moment she had thought about since she was a little girl. She wanted it to be perfect, like something out of a fairytale. There would be romantic music playing softly, fairy lights twinkling and maybe a candle or two; and definitely no screaming brothers around, causing chaos as they play-fought in the public swimming pool. Okay maybe it wouldn't be perfect, but she wanted it to just be the two of them. No distractions.

"Have you seen the lifeguard?" Grace awed, suddenly appearing next to Ivy with her twin sister.

"No," Ivy laughed, looking up and trying to see who her cousins were gawping at. The twins sat on the lounger next to her and leaned in to gossip just as Ivy spotted the man in question.

He had short blonde hair, seemed quite tall with fairly pale skin and was walking towards the lifeguard post, taking over from Eddie West who looked like he might have fallen asleep on the red plastic chair. Ivy could see where the twins were coming from with their gasps, he was clearly attractive. But Ivy shrugged, he definitely wasn't her type. What did surprise her though was how familiar he was.

"Is there anywhere he *doesn't* work?" Lily whispered; her eyes wide with intrigue as she watched the older teenager swap with Eddie.

"I've definitely seen him at the movies," Grace added, eyeing him up.

A memory clicked in Ivy's head and she gasped, "Oh! I think I saw him in the grocery store."

"Yep," Lily smiled, "that was where we first saw him."

"His name is Tristan," Grace whispered before turning to Ivy with a teasing grin. "Do you think he gives Ryan a run for his money?"

Ivy laughed, shaking her head. "No he doesn't. Not in my opinion anyway."

The twins looked at each other, sharing an expression that practically screamed 'Ivy and Ryan are so cute!'

Ivy blushed, averting her eyes and thankful for the arrival of Chloe who waved at the girls from the poolside entrance. She walked in with her mom Robin who was holding extra supplies from the store.

"Hey honey! Honey!" Steve shouted from the pool, waving his hand frantically at Robin from where he still sat on the unicorn float. "What do you think?"

His loud shouting brought to everyone's attention the new arrivals, and Ivy watched as Chloe quickly averted her eyes from James who turned his head sharply to stare over at her. He looked away almost as quickly, as if he hadn't just eagerly lifted his head and wasn't now blushing. Ivy narrowed her eyes and watched her brother for a moment. She was on to him.

Robin paused to turn and look at her husband, her eyebrow raising in mild surprise by his current water float. She smirked and shouted, "I've never seen you look so good!"

Steve laughed and paddled the unicorn to the edge of the swimming pool to greet his wife while Chloe made a beeline for Ivy and the twins.

"Hi guys," she said with a smile as she put down her shopping bag on the concrete floor beside Ivy's sun lounger.

"Hey Chloe," Lily, Grace and Ivy said in unison, making them all grin with amusement. Ivy was sure they were more like triplets than cousins.

"Did you get anything good?" Grace asked eagerly, her blue eyes wandering over the bag while Lily had gone back to staring at Tristan the lifeguard.

"Yeah," Chloe smiled, routing through the bag and handing the girls snacks and magazines. She pulled out a particular glossy magazine

that made Ivy raise her eyebrow and laugh.

"I'm surprised that your mom let you buy Cosmo!"

Chloe blushed and averted her eyes for a moment, "I um...I might have said it was for you..."

The twins laughed and Ivy rolled her eyes but didn't object any further, taking the magazine off Chloe so she could at least keep up with appearances. Chloe settled down on the same sun lounger and lay with Ivy, both girls turning the pages of Cosmo and giggling now and again at some of the stories.

After the twins had decided to go and have a swim, Ivy offered the right earphone of her ipod. "Want to listen to some music?"

"Sure," Chloe beamed, settling back slightly as she put in the earphone.

Ivy wandered through her music and put on songs that she already knew Chloe liked, which was mainly One Direction and Justin Bieber.

"Show you off! Tonight I wanna show you off!" They sang and bobbed their shoulders along to the Justin Bieber and Nicki Minaj hit.

"We're gonna party like it's 3012 tonight, I wanna show you all the finer things in life. So just forget about the world, we young tonight. I'm coming for ya, I'm coming for ya!"

"I honestly don't get why people have such a problem with the Biebs," Ivy commented as she tapped her foot to the music. "He's got a great voice!"

Before Chloe could respond there was a sniggered "yeah right" making them both look up. James had stopped in front of them, a beach ball in his hands, Sam eagerly waiting for him to chuck it back into the pool.

Chloe immediately tensed up and looked down at the magazine, trying to pretend she wasn't affected by the arrival of the boy she was clearly crushing on.

Ivy looked at her brother and exhaled a bored sigh, "no one asked your opinion, okay? So why don't you go back to the baby pool."

James glared at his sister, his cheeks going slightly pink. Ivy was amazed that he even seemed embarrassed, he wasn't usually present enough in the moment to even get that he was being teased.

"He's rubbish. When you compare him to like the greats, he's like a tiny fish in a big pond - "

Ivy had only opened her mouth to respond when Chloe said harshly, "you're just jealous."

It was one of those moments when everything goes quiet for a moment. Ivy was amazed that Chloe had said something, let alone disagreeing with the boy she had chased after since she was tiny. But James looked even more stunned and if it was possible, he had gone even more pink than before. Ivy couldn't help the smile that was twitching onto her lips.

James spluttered for words for a moment, shuffling from one foot to the other. "W-What? Why...why would I be jealous of him?"

Chloe shrugged, her face tight and dismissive as she turned the page of Cosmo magazine. "Maybe because he is more talented than you will ever be."

Ooh burn! Ivy thought looking between Chloe and James. Her brother opened his mouth to speak and then closed it again. Sam was still shouting for him to throw the damn ball and it seemed to bring James out of whatever cloud of confusion that had shrouded him. He shook his head, like he was clearing his thoughts and then turned away, throwing the ball to Sam and then jumping back into the water. Ivy was surprised steam hadn't risen from the pool considering how red James had become.

She waited for him to be out of earshot before turning to Chloe with a look of amazement. It took a moment for the younger teen to look away from the magazine and meet Ivy's expression.

"What?" Chloe asked awkwardly, her green eyes already telling Ivy

that the battle within had simmered down for now.

"What do you mean 'what'?" Ivy laughed, making Chloe's serious face falter slightly. "So I'm guessing you're going down the route of playing hard to get?"

Chloe grinned but didn't say anything for a moment. She eventually shrugged, "I don't know. I just...I had to defend Justin you know?"

Ivy smirked but nodded solemnly. "I understand."

Chloe exhaled a deep breath, her eyes betraying her for a moment as she watched James. He didn't look back at the girls but it was very obvious something was wrong with him. His jaw seemed so tight it might snap any moment and his shoulders looked so tense that his muscles were probably in pain.

"I don't think he likes me anyway. There's no playing hard to get needed..."

Ivy looked at Chloe, surprised by her response. "I don't think that's true," she said earnestly, also taking a moment to look at her brother. "I think he likes you. I mean, I actually don't think he realises it yet. But yeah, there's just something about this situation that tells me it isn't the end yet."

"You think?" Chloe asked, looking annoyed at herself for not being able to keep the longing out of her voice. She might pretend that this was just a crush, but it didn't take long to understand it was so much more than that.

Ivy nodded, looking back at Chloe and giving her an encouraging smile. "I do yeah. So don't give up Miss Harrington! If you think my brother is worth it, just be your beautiful self and he'll eventually see what he's been missing."

Chloe seemed to perk up slightly and that was all Ivy needed to see. She had always wanted a sister but had at least been blessed with female cousins to grow up with. Ivy counted Chloe like family and wondered if maybe one day she legally would be. If a certain brother realised how perfect she would be for him of course!

"Can you please drive a bit slower," Max grumbled to her husband. The sunglasses obscuring her face not hiding the sheer queasiness she was feeling as she attempted to curl into a ball in the passenger seat.

"I'm trying," Lucas sighed, his hands tightening on the steering wheel. "But I can't avoid all the bumps."

"Please try harder," Max responded, massaging her temple with her fingers.

Zach sniggered from the back seat, shaking his head. "Mom you always say you're never going to drink again."

"And your night out was *two* days ago," Ryan added with a smirk.

"Yes, I know that," Max snapped, huffing with frustration at the lack of sympathy from her boys. "You just wait until your hungover and need your dear mommy to look after you! You'll be lucky if I give you a bucket."

The boys all laughed making Max's lips twitch slightly in a smile. She turned to Ryan, "can I have a burger please?"

"Sure," Ryan grinned, digging his hand into one of the large brown bags filled with warm and mouthwatering burgers from Benny's. He passed one of the foil covered delights to his mom who wolfed down the meal like it was her first in a month.

"Are you going to be okay at the pool?" Lucas asked Max, glancing at his wife with concern.

"I'll be fine," Max nodded as she took a sip of water. "I just need to load up on the carbs and get a bit of fresh air."

Ryan watched his parents for a moment and smiled, his mind drifting off as he thought about how Ivy had been after the high school party. It was strange seeing her tipsy like that, but he would be lying if he said he didn't enjoy looking after her. And the things she came out with were hilarious, especially when she thanked him for being born. Ryan almost snorted with amusement as he remembered that moment, he wondered if Ivy had any idea she had said that.

"Here we are," Lucas called as he looked for a space in the small parking lot for the community pool.

"I swear it hasn't changed a bit," Max commented as she looked out of the window.

Once Lucas had pulled up, Zach and Ryan managed to get out of the car whilst holding the bulging bags of burgers and fries. Lucas on the other hand got stuck helping Max out of the car, trying not to smile as she groaned and muttered that she meant it this time, she was never drinking again.

"We'll see about that," Ryan muttered to Zach who laughed, both of them looking back at their mom who was insistent on keeping her sunglasses on.

The moment the Sinclair's walked through the entrance and onto the wet concrete floor, there was a shout from a very excited Dustin. "Guys! They're here! The food is here!" His exclamation was followed by a cheer from the boys in the pool and Ryan and Zach immediately found themselves surrounded by hungry teenagers and middle-aged men. In fact, it almost looked like Sam and Dustin were fighting over a burger, whilst Laura rolled her eyes and got in the middle, pulling out two burgers and stuffing them in her husband and son's faces.

"Ooh these look good," came Ivy's voice from behind Ryan, making him jump slightly as she appeared by his side, her attention on the bags while Ryan's eyes had widened, his own attention solely on her.

She was wearing a navy blue high waisted bikini, the bikini bottoms covering up to her belly button, but not missing the smooth lines of her upper stomach. Ryan didn't know what to think of the bikini top, all he knew was he was blushing and suddenly felt red hot. He prayed Ivy couldn't feel the heat that was pouring off his skin and instead tried to take a very subtle step away from her, hoping it just looked like he was letting her get closer to the food.

It worked of course, Ivy moved forward and had her hands in the bag, pulling out a portion of fries and a burger while Ryan tried to look anywhere but at her bikini from the back, especially when she bent for her food. He felt suddenly helpless, looking anywhere else.

He was seventeen, Ivy was seventeen. He couldn't pretend he didn't notice the way she had developed, how that young female body had changed over the years and was now a young woman's body. Beautiful, soft curves, smooth skin that he begged to touch...

"Are you not going to eat anything?" Ivy asked, half way through her burger as she returned to Ryan's side.

Shit. I actually have to remember how to speak. "Er...um y-yeah. Of course I am," he tried to say in a laugh that sounded more like a strangled cough as he grabbed his own food.

Ivy smiled at Ryan and ushered him over to where she had set herself up on one of the sun loungers. She lay back down gracefully, all the while munching on her food. Ryan was not as elegant as he practically collapsed onto the lounger beside Ivy. They both laughed at his clumsiness and for a moment settled into a comfortable silence as they ate.

After a while Ivy looked over at Max and smiled, turning to Ryan. "How is your mom doing?"

Ryan was grateful for the distraction, he was trying desperately to clear his mind, praying that Ivy or possibly worse, her *mom* couldn't read his thoughts. Needless to say, Mike would be drowning him in the swimming pool right about now.

"She's suffering alright," he laughed, shaking his head disapprovingly. "I don't get why she drinks that much on a night out if she's going to suffer for days."

Ivy grinned, "that's your mom though. She's the wild one! I love her for that."

Ryan smiled, looking over at his mom who was lying down beside the pool eating fries. "In a way so do I", he couldn't help but admit. She certainly was a fun mom, but at the same time she had a soft side, especially for her boys. Ryan knew he could always turn to her; she always had his back.

"All our parents are a bit crazy," Ivy admitted with a sigh as she

looked over at Mike and shook her head. "Take my dad for instance. He always burns and yet he hasn't put any sun cream on his legs. You just wait...a few hours and he's going to look like a lobster."

Ryan laughed, his brown eyes finding Mike for a moment who had a strained look on his face as he tried to make some order over the food and the hungry teenage boys.

"Your mom isn't crazy," Ryan reasoned looking back at Ivy who smiled.

"No, she's just *gifted*."

"And so are you," Ryan smiled, bringing his knees up to his chest and resting his arms on his legs. He looked at Ivy and caught her in a shy smile, his heart immediately fluttered as he stared at her. Powers or no powers she was magical.

Ivy's smile wavered slightly as she heaved a sigh, her shoulders rising and falling as she looked out at the water. "It's not easy having these powers. I always have to be mindful about them. But sometimes...if I'm feeling a certain way, they just happen. It's hard to control."

"Have you spoken to your mom about it?" Ryan asked with concern, Ivy having his full attention.

She shrugged, looking over at her mom. "I have in the past...I don't know. I don't want to make her feel guilty or something. Like I wouldn't have these powers if it wasn't for her."

"That's true," Ryan reasoned before smiling slightly. "But they are a part of you and a part of your mom. If anyone knows how to control them or knows what it's like to live with them, then it's her. I'm pretty sure if she knew you were struggling with any aspect of your powers then she would want you to come to her."

Ivy looked at Ryan and grinned teasingly "you're so wise aren't you".

Ryan laughed, pretending to write on his hand, "I will add wise to my list of compliments from Ivy. It can go next to 'being born'."

Ivy gasped and laughed, reaching out to playfully hit Ryan who

ducked just in time. "I didn't think you'd heard that!"

He grinned, finding it hard to speak from laughing. "It was a little hard to miss!" He smirked and put a hand on his chest. "I never knew you felt this way," he said dramatically.

"Respect your elders!" Ivy teased pointing her finger at her best friend who snorted.

"You know you're only 5 weeks older than me, right?"

"That's still a *month* older than you Mr Sinclair."

"Okay Miss Cougar," Ryan teased while Ivy glared at him playfully, but she didn't say anything in retaliation except to throw a fry at him, which he caught and ate, a big grin on his face.

"I don't understand why we *always* have to clean up after the gremlins," Ivy huffed an hour later as she and Ryan picked up the foil wrappers and empty cans while James, Ben, Zach and Sam lay next to the pool in food comas.

"It's because we're the oldest ones," Ryan sighed, rolling his eyes. "We're the *responsible* ones."

"I wish we were treated like we're responsible," Ivy laughed. "We're only responsible when it comes to chores. I feel like Cinderella!"

Ryan grinned to himself as he picked up Ivy's discarded flip flop. "Here's your glass slipper princess."

Ivy smirked and took it off him, chucking it back on her sun lounger before emptying the rubbish into the trash can.

"Thanks for cleaning up," came a third voice, making both Ryan and Ivy look up as the life guard who had been walking past, paused and smiled at Ivy. Not Ryan, just Ivy.

"Kids usually leave a load of crap. So it's nice someone actually cares," he smiled.

"Well, we've got to care about the planet," Ivy smiled back politely.

The lifeguard nodded in agreement and then reached out his hand to shake. "I'm Tristan by the way."

Ivy looked awkwardly at his hand for a moment but then her lips curved and her manners took over, shaking his hand as she said "I'm Ivy."

"Ivy," Tristan repeated, still holding her hand while Ryan looked between the teenagers, heat rising in his stomach. "That's a beautiful name."

The heat in Ryan's stomach bubbled up and he felt a streak of jealousy wash over him. He gritted his teeth as he watched Ivy take her hand out of Tristan's.

"Thanks," she smiled. "Um...nice to meet you."

"You too, maybe I'll see you around." Tristan said, giving her one last grin before walking off. Ryan watched him go, his eyes narrowing slightly as he noticed Tristan look back at Ivy once more before switching with the next life guard.

Ryan didn't know how to feel. Ivy wasn't just the best person he had ever met; she was also extremely attractive. He knew other guys must act like this around her, but something about that guy unsettled him. Was it the way he had held her hand a little too long or the way he had totally blanked Ryan?

"Are you okay?" came Ivy's concerned voice making Ryan jump. He didn't realize he had still been staring at where Tristan had just left.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Ryan said slightly startled as he turned back to Ivy, not quite looking her in the eye and feeling incredibly awkward. He couldn't be mad at her, she hadn't done anything wrong. She was just her polite, lovely self. She didn't flirt with that guy, she didn't lead him on or be overfriendly but Ryan couldn't shake the sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"Ryan!" Zach shouted over from the other side of the pool. "We're gonna play a game of chicken!"

Ryan sighed in relief, he had never been so grateful in his entire life for his brother and his interruption. That was all he needed, a bit of competitive normality with the group to ease whatever queasiness he had suddenly experienced.

"Okay, so let's figure out partners," Sam said to the group of teens who were all now in the pool.

"Ivy and Ryan will *obviously* partner up," Zach added with a smirk, ignoring the annoyed look his older brother gave him.

"It was inevitable," Ivy whispered to Ryan, perking him up slightly as his face seemed to lift from the cloud it was under. He smiled at his best friend and nodded.

"Let's beat their asses," Ryan muttered back to Ivy who grinned, not noticing the way she admired his torso. He had discarded his shirt just before they got in the water.

"We're going to partner up," Lily and Grace shouted in unison to no one's surprise.

"Okay," Sam smiled before turning to Chloe. "Chlo who do you want to go with?"

She opened her mouth to speak but was cut off by Zach who coughed, "James". It wasn't exactly subtle and Zach immediately had glares coming at him from Chloe and James.

"No," she snapped, lifting her chin in defiance. "I was thinking you Sam."

Sam looked surprised and averted his eyes awkwardly from James who suddenly had a complex expression on his face before he was unreadable. "Um, yeah that's fine."

"Me and Ben will be partners," James suddenly spoke up, surprising his brother who had been sitting by the side of the pool his thin legs dangling in the water.

"Who am I partnering up with then?" Zach asked, looking hurt.

Tyler laughed from where he was watching the young teenagers and jumped in. "I'll partner up with you."

Zach smiled in relief, "thanks dude."

Ben swam over to James who was very quiet. His jaw looked so tight that it might snap any moment.

"If you didn't want to be partners you could have just said," Ben said looking put out.

James blinked and looked at his brother. "No, it's not that," he muttered, shaking his head before chancing a glance at Sam as Chloe climbed onto his shoulders, both of them laughing slightly.

He took a deep breath and turned back to Ben, "listen," he whispered. "We can't let the others win this. Especially Sam and Chloe – "

"Why Sam and – "

"Because they just can't, okay?!" James snapped, before closing his eyes in embarrassment. "Sorry," he coughed awkwardly before helping his little brother on his shoulders. "Just try your best," James called to Ben who nodded his head, narrowing his eyes competitively.

"Dad!" Sam called over to Dustin who lifted his head from the sun lounger. "Will you be our referee? Make sure the Wheeler's don't cheat?" he teased, trying to get James to at least smirk but there was no response from his best friend.

Dustin laughed, "of course buddy." He wasn't the only one to sit on the edge of the pool and watch the kids, practically all of the parents lined up, cheering on their children.

"Ready?" Dustin asked the group, a big childish grin on his face. The teenagers all nodded, Ivy, Ben, Chloe, Lily and Zach secured on the shoulders of Ryan, James, Sam, Grace and Tyler.

"Go!"

James went to move straight towards Chloe and Sam but frowned

when they engaged in battle with Lily and Grace. Instead, he had to suddenly turn and battle Zach and Tyler.

"You've got this Ben!" James shouted, water splashing all around him as he tried to plant his feet as best he could in the water. "Just don't let go, I've got you!"

In theory Ben shouldn't be able to beat Zach who was three years old than him, but whether it was because Tyler was taller than James and so Zach had to lean down to wrestle with Ben or just because the youngest Wheeler was quick with his movements, but Zach fell into the water to a cheer from Mike and El who were delighted with their sons.

"Great job!" James shouted to Ben as he turned to find Sam and Chloe. He huffed with frustration when he saw Ivy and Ryan were already wrestling with them, Ivy then managing to push both Chloe and Sam into the water.

The twins had already been taken out by Chloe and Sam and were cheering from the side. It was now down to Ryan and Ivy and Ben and James.

"Remember not to use any of your talents!" Mike shouted to his kids, looking around the deserted pool, thankful for once that the splash park in the next town had taken most of the trade from the Hawkins community pool.

"You can do this Ben!" James shouted as his little brother started wrestling their sister who had a determined grin on her face. He knew that Ben couldn't beat Ivy, even without her powers she was strong. They had all done enough wrestling and fighting at home to know that. But James couldn't help but be proud of Ben who was trying his hardest. He lasted longer than any of them would have thought, until Ivy's strength was a bit too much and ended up tipping both James and Ben backwards.

"Not bad brothers!" Ivy laughed, as the boys emerged from the water, out of breath and panting. Ben grinned, happy with his role as James pushed his dark wavy hair out of his eyes and looked over at Chloe who was watching him. He quickly averted his eyes, his cheeks

feeling warm.

"Should we show them how it's really done?" James heard Max shout as she grinned at the fellow adults, wiggling her eyebrows daring them to join in.

"And you won't be sick on me?" Lucas said, eyeing up his wife with concern.

Max laughed, "no I'm good now. I've had the carb overload I needed."

"That's what I'm worried about," Lucas muttered while Max jumped into the water.

"Okay I'll be your ref," Sam called to the adults as he lifted himself onto the side of the pool while the parents partnered up. The rest of the teenagers joined their friends, all curious to see what their parents would be like in this competitive game.

"Place your bets guys," Zach muttered to the others as he watched Max climb onto Lucas's shoulders.

"I think it'll be El and Mike," Lily said, cringing as she watched her parents laughing and kissing before getting into position.

"Yeah, it'll be mom and dad," Ben said grinning as El waved over from Mike's shoulders. She had that competitive smirk on her face that Ben and Ivy shared.

"No, I think it's going to be my mom and dad," Chloe said with a smile. "Mom is the Chief after all."

"Don't underestimate my mom," Ryan laughed, shaking his head at his parents.

Once all the parents were in place, Sam counted down before shouting "go!" and the battle commenced with the kids all cheering on their parents.

The only person who was quiet was James. His eyes were on the match, he watched as Laura and Dustin pushed down Jen and Will, and Max and Robin wrestled, but his heart wasn't in it. He felt

strange. He couldn't explain it and he didn't really know why. All he knew was he was...upset. Images played in his head, Chloe's voice echoed around his mind as she told him 'he was just jealous' and how angry her face had been when it was suggested that she partner up with James. That defiant 'no'.

There was booing and cheering that ruptured through James's complex thoughts and he blinked, looking back at the match as Max landed in the pool and then shouted at Lucas who "wasn't holding her tight enough!".

It was down to Robin and Steve, and El and Mike. James tried to break himself out of the rut his thoughts had put him in and cheered on his parents for a change.

"Come on mom!" Ivy shouted, clapping her hands.

"You've got this!" James added, cheering as his mom and Robin laughed and wrestled.

The battle went on for a bit, Mike clenching his teeth as he tried to stop from falling, holding onto El's legs tightly, but Steve was stronger than him, pushing forward through the water until Mike lost his balance, falling backwards.

"Yes!" Robin and Steve cheered while the kids clapped for them. El emerged from the water laughing as she admitted defeat, pulling her slightly annoyed husband along with her. Mike grumbled about losing to Steve who teased him all of the way until they were out of the pool.

"Which loser is buying us ice cream then?" Steve grinned before his mischievous eyes turned on Mike.

"Fine," Mike huffed. "But you can help me carry them."

"Gladly young paladin," Steve bowed as he followed an annoyed Mike.

The sun was slowly moving along the horizon while the group ate their ice creams, Mike cringing slightly from his lounger when he

tried to suitably touch his pink legs, hoping no one would notice. Was it a bit too late to bathe them in sun cream?

Sam and Zach sat together finishing off their ice cream, James was still in the water doing lengths of the pool, very much in his own world.

Zach frowned, "what do you think is wrong with him?"

Sam shrugged his shoulders but his eyes showed worry. "I'm not sure..." He glanced over at Chloe who was reading a magazine with the twins. "Maybe it's to do with Chloe," he whispered.

Zach looked clueless for a moment before his eyes widened. "Oh because of the whole Bieblove thing?"

Sam opened his mouth and shut it again. He was pretty sure that wasn't bothering his best friend right now, but he didn't want to say anything that could be incorrect, but Sam had his own suspicions.

Zach seemed to take Sam's lack of a response as an answer. "I know what would cheer him up," he said with a slight smile before calling out to James.

When James didn't appear to hear him, Zach reached for the beach ball and threw it at their best friend who spluttered and stopped swimming, looking over at the boys with surprise and mild frustration.

"What?!" he called.

"Just come here," Zach shouted, ushering him over.

James sighed but did as he was told, swimming over to the boys who both leaned down slightly so they could talk quietly.

"Look," Zach started, his voice just above a whisper. "You seem down man, and I have just the idea to cheer you up."

"You do?" James asked, raising his eyebrow. Sam noticed that he didn't deny he was feeling upset.

"We said we were going to investigate if 'you know who' is Bieblow right?"

"Yeah," James said warily, his eyes betraying him for a moment as he saw the girl in question. She wasn't looking over; she was quite happily chatting away with his cousins.

Zach looked around for a moment at the adults and then turned back to James, his gaze going between him and Sam. "Well, why don't we investigate right now?"

James frowned, shaking his head. "I don't know man."

"Oh come on!" Zach smiled, trying to encourage his friend. "I think it would cheer you up, we might even get to the bottom of this investigation and you won't have to wonder if it's her or not."

James hesitated, his brow creasing as he tried to think of what was best. He looked at Sam, "what do you think?"

Sam rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. "I mean...it would be good to finally solve this mystery. And who knows, maybe she'll wanna play *with* us rather than against us and we might have a shot at winning for a change."

"That's true," Zach nodded. "Come on man, I know you're dying to know."

James wavered after a moment, heaving a breath. "How would we even do this?"

Sam appeared to be in deep thought for a moment before smiling slightly. "What if I just ask Steve if we can go over to his house to shoot hoops or something?"

"But we'd need the key for the house," James reminded him quietly.

"Um," Sam frowned, the cogs in his brain working before he laughed. "I'll say we need the key in case we need to take a leak or something."

"I think that might work," Zach smirked, looking over at Steve who was goading Mike about winning the game of chicken. "Go ask him

now while he's in a good mood."

Sam pulled his legs out of the pool and stumbled to his feet, hurrying over to Steve. James and Zach watched him with baited breath. There really was nothing to worry about though because Steve was nodding and smiling, pulling his keys out of his jacket pocket, clearly trusting his god son.

Sam walked back to the boys with a jubilant smile on his face, he spun the key around his finger. "Easy!"

"We've got a mystery to solve," Zach said with a grin as he stood up and grabbed his shirt.

James couldn't help but laugh, pulling himself out of the pool. Maybe this was a good idea, it would certainly distract him and hopefully shed some light on the whole mystery of Bieblove. Was it Chloe? And if so, why was she hiding it?

The water rippled as Ivy dived into the pool, emerging with a sputter and laugh as she pushed her dark hair out of her eyes. "I told you to hold me steady!" she giggled.

Ryan grinned, "I'm sorry I'm not a *cheerleader*, okay?!"

Ivy laughed, "neither am I! But you can be in the water. Come on, let's try it again."

Ryan rolled his eyes playfully, but did as he was told, cupping his hands together as Ivy placed her foot in his palm and on three lifted herself up. She tried to do a stand, even kicking her leg out before she lost her balance and fell back into the water.

"You know, if you lived in San Diego, you could use our pool every weekend." Ryan teased once Ivy had come up to the water surface.

"Only every weekend?!" she joked back, gasping in mock surprise.

Ryan grinned, "you know you would be more than welcome to come over every day. But you'd have to choose California for college. Not that I'm trying to bribe you or anything..."

Ivy laughed, narrowing her eyes mischievously. "Shame on you Ryan Sinclair."

Her best friend shrugged his shoulders innocently and smiled as he started to swim, Ivy joining him. "But seriously," he asked her after a moment of quiet swimming. "Have you thought about where you want to go to college?"

"Oh definitely," Ivy admitted, a slight smile on her lips as she looked ahead at the water, moving her arms with purpose as they stroked through the water. "And California is definitely up there. Mom and dad both went to college in California and you live there so..."

Ryan didn't say anything but the smile on his face was so wide that even though he tried to hide it in the water, he was positive it would be seen from his home state.

"I will apply," Ivy said as they reached the other side of the pool, resting against the cold tiles for a moment. "But I might defer."

"Defer?" Ryan asked with interest, his back against the pool wall as he looked at his best friend.

"Yeah," Ivy admitted with a shy smile. "I like the idea of travelling. Maybe...I don't know, if you don't have any college plans yet, you could travel with me?"

Ryan felt warmth rush through his body at the prospect of travelling with Ivy. In truth he didn't have college plans yet and so the idea of travelling with his best friend, who also happened to be the girl he was mad about, was a dream come true.

"I suppose I could put up with you," Ryan reasoned while Ivy splashed him. "Where would we go?" he couldn't help but ask eagerly as Ivy lifted herself onto the edge of the pool.

"Wherever the wind takes us," she laughed, grabbing her towel and standing up to dry off.

Ryan couldn't stop from smiling, it felt like it would never leave his face and he would just have to get used to the ache in his cheek bones. Because Ivy made him happier than he had ever been in his

life and the fact that she wanted to spend even more time with him? Explore other countries, just the two of them? It was monumental.

"Give me a hand?" Ryan asked reaching out his hand for Ivy, who rolled her eyes but took his hand, screaming the next minute when he pulled her back into the pool.

Ryan was laughing so much that he barely heard Ivy's gasped "why would I want to go travelling with you?!"

He grinned, unable to stop his giggles as he helped her push her smooth dark hair out of her eyes. "because I'm your favorite person."

"I am doubting that decision," Ivy commented before splashing Ryan and running away from him, giggling and screaming when he caught up to her and twirled her around.

The teenagers were so wrapped up in the moment they didn't realize they were being watched by their parents. El looked at Max and both moms grinned, sighing almost in unison.

"Are we going to have trouble with those two?" Lucas grinned, turning to look at Mike who was watching the kids laughing. The smile on Ivy's face was brighter than he had ever seen, the water might have sparkled from the sun, but it was nothing compared to his daughter.

"I hope not," Mike admitted, smiling despite himself. "They do look happy."

"They remind me of teenage Mike and El," Lucas snorted making Mike cringe and turn to his best friend.

"Don't say that."

"It's the truth man," Lucas smirked, crushing his can and walking towards the sun loungers.

"What do you mean by that," Mike muttered following his best friend who was laughing at him with pity. "Lucas? Lucas?!"

The wide stair case of the Harrington house creaked slightly as Zach, Sam and James hurried upstairs, slightly out of breath from their partial run to the house that was 10 minutes away from the community pool.

"We seriously need to get fit," Sam muttered wiping his sweaty brow.

"You should join track then," James whispered, the only one not out of breath.

"Why are we even whispering?" Zach murmured back, "it's not like anyone is here."

"Good point," James and Sam said in unison as they reached the top of the stairs and looked around the landing.

"Which is Chloe's room again?" Zach frowned, glancing at the doors. It had been a while since he had been at this house.

"This one," Sam said, pointing at the door to the right. When Zach gave him a raised eyebrow, Sam blushed. "I've grown up with her man! Her dad is my god father."

"I suppose," Zach smirked.

James didn't say anything but hurried forward to the bedroom door before hesitating, looking back at his best friends. "Are we sure about this?"

Sam huffed out of breath and shrugged his shoulders, "we've come this far man."

James bit his lip and turned back to the bedroom door pushing it open slightly. The boys hurried in but then paused, taking the room in for a moment. To no surprise there was posters on the wall of Justin Bieber, One Direction and Taylor Swift. But it was the small things that surprised James, like the soft green color of her walls. Was that her favorite color? There was a guitar leaning against Chloe's desk and a large picture board above her laptop covered in family photographs.

There were photos with some of her friends too where she smiled so

brightly. She looked pretty when she smiled like that. Really pretty.

"Ooh look it's you James!" Zach teased, causing him to jump out of his daze and follow Zach's finger to a photo of Chloe smiling with Ivy, James, Ben and Tyler.

"That's a family photo idiot!" James huffed, shaking his head as he looked around at the room again. "Where do we even start?"

Sam was already looking at Chloe's tv, trying to see if he could see any leads for the Xbox. "Try looking in her closet or under her bed," he suggested.

Zach immediately dropped to the floor and army crawled towards the bed as if they were on a real secret mission, while James cautiously opened Chloe's closet, the smell of her clean clothes hitting him for a moment as he tried to blink and search underneath the various shoes that were littered at the bottom.

James didn't know how long they looked but it was getting frustration. "We may as well just go because we're not going to find anything."

"Just a bit longer," Zach frowned trying to reach the shelves of the closet. "There's got to be more evidence than a Justin Bieber poster!"

"Don't you mean five Justin Bieber posters," Sam smiled as he looked through Chloe's DVD's hoping to find an Xbox game hidden inside.

"James give me a boost," Zach called to his friend who timidly joined him, just about to lift his foot when someone cleared their throat.

Sam, James and Zach all froze, slowly turning towards the door where Tyler Harrington was leaning against the frame with his arms crossed. His face was a mixture of surprise, amazement and something James had never seen in him before. But he would call it *protective brother mode*.

"Dudes, what the hell are you doing?"

The boys looked at each other, all speechless for a moment, James still holding onto Zach's leg until he realized what he was doing and

quickly let go.

"Wh-What are you doing back?" Zach asked Tyler trying to deflect.

"We're all heading back here for a barbecue, dad asked me to come back to light it. But more importantly, what are you guys doing in *here*? In my *little sister's* room? If you're here to blackmail Chloe, I can assure you as her brother I'm the only person allowed to do that."

Uh oh, *protective brother mode* was definitely initiated.

"We're not trying to blackmail her," James insisted feeling sheepish.

"It's kind of embarrassing," Sam admitted. "We're sort of on a mission." His eyes lit up as a thought came to mind. "Hey! You might actually be able to help us!"

"How so?" Tyler asked, looking intrigued, his guard coming down slightly.

"Do you have an Xbox Tyler? Or does Chloe?"

Tyler frowned, clearly confused by their question and not expecting this to be where the conversation had taken them. "Chloe doesn't have an Xbox. I don't have one anymore either, I'm too busy with the ladies."

Zach huffed in frustration, "do you have an old one then?"

"Yeah somewhere," Tyler sighed, the smart phone in his denim jacket suddenly started to ring.

"Where is it now?!" James asked desperately.

Tyler shrugged, "I don't know man," he said as he pulled out his phone, his lips curving into a smile as he saw the name coming up on his phone. "Excuse me guys," he looked up at the boys. "Oh, and get out of my sister's room before I beat your asses."

He turned, a murmured "hey baby," coming out of his mouth as he walked towards the stairs with the phone against his ear.

James sighed, turning to his friends. "He's right, we need to get out of here. Especially if they're on the way."

"Yeah," Sam sighed in defeat, looking around the room to try and make sure everything was how they left it. "Wasn't that pillow a bit straighter?" he commented, pointing to the yellow patterned pillow case closer to Zach, who picked it up to adjust.

The three boys paused as they stared at what was under Chloe's pillow. It was what looked like her journal and the yearbook, open on the page that James had signed. He was pretty sure he hadn't added the hearts around his name. His cheeks immediately went bright red as Zach noticed and burst out laughing.

"Oh my god this is brilliant," Zach grinned almost close to tears. "Jackpot!" he shouted chucking Chloe's journal at James who caught it awkwardly.

"I am not reading this!" James shouted trying to offer it back to Zach who had picked up the year book.

"Dude that probably has the answer to whether Chloe is bieblove or not!"

"I am not reading it," James said through clenched teeth. He felt suddenly boiling hot with embarrassment. Did he think it might have the answer to the mystery? Of course it probably did. But it might have other stuff in it too, stuff that Sam or Zach wouldn't let go of and definitely tease James about. If the red hearts on the yearbook were anything to go by, the journal would be much, much worse.

"Please, let's just put them back," James whispered, practically sweating as he thrusted the journal at Zach.

"Fine," Zach huffed, reaching for the journal, his eyes suddenly going wide as he looked over James's shoulder.

The tension in the room suddenly rose to something cold and deadly and James didn't want to move. From Zach's reaction and Sam's gasped breath he knew exactly who was going to be standing there when he turned around.

Struggling to gulp down the ball of anxiety that had suddenly filled his throat, James slowly turned, time seemed to go into slow motion as he stared into the confused eyes of Chloe.

She was stood in the door way, her hand dropping her bag to the floor as her eyes went from the open yearbook in Zach's hand to the journal in James's. Her eyes widened and as they suddenly filled with embarrassment, despair and what looked like tears, James felt something inside of him break as he was suddenly filled with immense guilt and remorse.

"Chloe it's not – " James began, but she cut him off.

"Get out of my room," she whispered, her whole body shaking as she moved her stare onto the bed, her eyes had glazed over and it was like she was willing herself not to be in this moment.

James tried again as Sam and Zach seemed to be frozen in horror.
"Chloe if you just – "

"No," she said fiercely, her face so hurt that James could barely look at her. "Get out! All of you. I never want to see any of you again!"

Sam looked just as devastated and hurried out, "Chloe I'm so sorry," he mumbled in embarrassment as Zach followed him, quickly dropping the year book on the carpet and hurrying after Sam, also trying to apologize to the shaking girl who was having none of it.

James tried to stay there, even know he was completely embarrassed and incredibly uncomfortable, he could read on Chloe's face what he had caused in her and he was wracked with pain over it. She needed to know he hadn't read her journal.

"Chloe please, we didn't read your journal, I swear – "

"But I bet you all laughed over my year book! And I bet you were just about to read my journal!" she accused him, her voice shaking.

"We...we weren't, I pro – "

"Just get out," she sniffled, looking away from James, her arms wrapped around her shaking body.

"If I can just explain – "

Chloe turned on the spot to glare at James, her eyes now filled with tears. "No! I'm just a joke to you and I *always* have been! GET OUT!"

James opened his mouth to speak, his heart beating so fast he thought it would rip out of his chest any second. He closed his mouth knowing that whatever he said to her, she wasn't going to believe him. He placed the journal on the bed and left her room, his head low in shame.

He reached the landing and turned around, wanting to tell her he was sorry, but he was met with a slammed door.

James slumped onto the top steps next to Zach and Sam. The boys were all quiet for a while, completely shaken by what had just happened. There was hustle and bustle happening in the rest of the house, the smell of the barbecue being lit hit the teenage boys' nostrils, and the laughter from the back yard could be heard anytime some one opened the sliding doors to get another drink.

"I'm really sorry guys," Zach finally mumbled, shaking his head. "This is totally my fault. I was only joking about reading her journal. I never would have, I just thought it was funny."

"I feel so guilty," Sam whispered, looking over at Chloe's closed bedroom and frowning deeply. "She's like my sister." He bit his lip and sighed getting up, "I'm gonna go and apologize."

Only Sam was back a moment later, looking more defeated than ever. "I couldn't go in there," he admitted sitting back down. "I could hear her crying."

James cringed at Sam's comment, his stomach tightening the knots that had coiled in place. "I don't know what to do," he finally admitted, his voice slightly croaky.

Sam sighed, "I think we just need to give her some time to calm down, and then we can explain what we were doing."

"Yeah," Zach nodded solemnly. "And when she's ready to come out I doubt she wants to see us idiots sitting on her stairs."

"True," Sam agreed, heaving a breath. He looked at the other two, "come on, let's give her some space."

James stayed sat as his two best friends stood up, both looking at him questioningly. "Just give me a bit more time," he told them, looking down at his clasped hands. "I'll see you guys in a bit."

They didn't argue this and left, taking their time down the stairs before going into the garden. James didn't know how long he was sat there, nervously watching Chloe's door, unsure what to do or how to act.

Her words 'I'm just a joke to you and I always have been!' tormented James. He shifted uneasily and tried to think if he had treated her badly in the past. He had always felt uncomfortable around her, mostly because the rumors that she had a crush on him. He had never known what to do with that knowledge and he couldn't see more than the girl that was weird around him. Hell, he didn't even know her favorite color. Except for her taste in music, James really knew nothing about Chloe. He supposed he had never really taken the time to learn or ask her.

His painful thoughts were broken by the arrival of Ivy who was walking up the stairs and looking at him suspiciously. "What have you done?" she asked with narrowed eyes.

For once James didn't feel up to arguing with her, he caught his sister's gaze and noticed it soften for a moment. That was until he explained what had happened and Ivy closed her eyes and pinched her nose.

"You're an idiot," she sighed, before telling James to go and join the others. He watched her knock at Chloe's door, telling the young girl who it was and going into the bedroom, closing the door firmly, not before James caught a glimpse of Chloe lying on her bed, his stomach tightening even more with guilt.

He eventually joined the others outside, sitting on the decking with a cold soda and batting away questions from his dad who asked him if he was okay.

"I'm fine," James said shortly, gulping down his soda and moving away.

Ivy eventually came out and made a beeline for her brother. James felt his palms becoming sweaty, terrified what she was going to say.

"She's really upset," Ivy said sternly, crossing her arms and looking at her ashamed brother. "Whether you read her journal or not, what you guys did was wrong. It was a complete invasion of privacy."

"I know," James cringed barely able to look Ivy in the eye. "We were just trying to figure out if she was keeping a secret from us."

"You could have just asked her," Ivy scolded him. Shaking her head, she continued, "look, you're not going to get a chance to apologize tonight because Chloe's telling Robin that she feels sick and doesn't want to join the barbecue."

"Oh," James muttered, feeling even worse that Chloe was not going to join her family and friends for food.

"But you need to apologize the first chance you get James. You've all hurt her, *especially* you."

"Why especially me?"

Ivy stared at him for a moment like it was obvious, "I think you know why."

James said nothing, his whole body feeling exhausted, both emotionally and physically. Even though he hated Ivy scolding him, he knew she was right. He tried to see it from Chloe's point of view and he knew she needed not only an explanation but a sincere apology. He only hoped she would give him the chance.

Notes for the Chapter:

To be continued! Thank you for reading 😊

6. Flames

Notes for the Chapter:

Look at me! Back after just over a week! This is like a record 🎵

But in all seriousness, thank you so much to all the lovely people who have left reviews, comments and sweet messages on instagram as well. It truly does mean the world to me and getting feedback makes the long hours of writing worth it.

I hope you enjoy this chapter! I certainly enjoyed writing it!

The Life We Deserve

Chapter 6 - Flames

Mike cringed as El drove over a pothole, his hand moving to his leg as he sighed, wincing slightly. The skin was hot to touch and looked bright red. He cautiously lifted the hem of his cargo pants and grimaced at what a contrast the lobster coloured skin was against the stark white of his thighs.

El's words of caution haunted Mike's mind as he thought back to the pool which was two days earlier.

“You’re going to get sunburnt.”

Mike huffed slightly as he reminded himself of his response. *“No, my legs never tan.”*

“Are you beating yourself up again?” El asked from the driver side, her lips twitching slightly as she tried to hide her amused smile.

“Maybe,” Mike replied, pouting as he crossed his arms. “I swear they

never tan! And now I look like that starfish from Spongebob Squarepants!"

El grinned, keeping her eyes on the road. "Patrick?"

"Yeah him," Mike said solemnly.

"I would have said you looked more like Mr Krabs."

"Hey!"

El burst out laughing, wiping her eyes as she tried to control herself. "I'm sorry honey," she said between giggles. "But you've just got to laugh at it. If we keep applying the creams, the redness will soon go down."

"And if they don't work?" Mike whined, wincing again as he pressed a finger to his legs.

El shrugged, turning into Maple Street. "Then you will just stay like that forever I suppose." Her voice was solemn but the side glance she gave Mike showed she was only teasing.

Mike sighed, shaking his head. "What did I do to put up with this abuse?"

El grinned, "next time listen to your dear wife. She's very wise."

Mike couldn't help but smile, turning to El and taking her hand for a moment, kissing it tenderly. "She certainly is."

Mike had barely got out of the car when the front door of the Wheeler house opened abruptly. Karen Wheeler stood looking as glamorous as ever. She waved excitedly at her son and daughter in law.

"Hey mom," Mike said, struggling not to flinch as he walked up the path, El by his side as she pressed the car key to lock the vehicle.

"Hi hon - " Karen began brightly before her eyes widened, her gaze fixated on Mike's bright red legs. "Oh honey what happened!" she gasped, her perfectly manicured hands going to her rosy cheeks.

“He didn’t listen to me when I told him to put on sun cream and...” El responded for Mike as she sadly gestured to his legs.

“Oh honey let me see what ointments and creams I have!” Karen gasped, bustling back into the house as Mike and a slightly annoyed El followed her in. She had already spent the last two days nursing her husband and applying cream regularly to his legs, so Karen’s intervention wasn’t necessary. But there was no stopping a mother and El knew that.

The moment they entered the house their nostrils were filled with the smell of baking, the sweetness of sugar in the air. They walked past the living room where Ted Wheeler was snoozing away in his armchair. Some things never changed.

“Hey dad,” Mike called, not at all surprised when even his raised voice didn’t wake up his father. He was definitely even more hard of hearing these days, to the fury of Karen.

“Where should I set up my laptop mom?” Mike asked as Karen came back into view, her hands laden with aftersun and different cream pots.

“The dining room?” she offered, looking nervously at the laptop. “So how will we be talking with Nancy and Holly?”

“Through video call mom,” Mike tried to explain patiently as he put down his laptop on the dark oak table. “Remember how we did with Holly at Christmas? Just the same thing again.”

“That sky thing was it?” Karen asked with a frown.

Mike smiled, “*Skype* mom.”

Karen nodded, pretending she understood it as she laid the creams on the table. “Now Michael I would try this one first. And have you thought about bathing in milk? Or putting natural yogurt on your legs?”

Mike cringed, “that sounds gross.”

“I assure you it is quite pain relieving for sunburn,” Karen smiled

slightly to herself. “I used to spend a bit of time at the community pool myself honey. And I won’t say I burnt myself like *you* have, but I certainly have burnt my shoulders before.”

Karen then gave her son a slightly reprimanding look. “You should be careful Michael with your fair skin. You know about skin cancer don’t you?”

Mike rolled his eyes while El helped herself to a drink, gritting her teeth. She had already given him the same lecture. “Yes *mom* I know,” he answered, feeling like a child. “I was just being foolish. Trust me, it *won’t* happen again.”

Karen sighed, “well be careful with going to the lake today. You are still going aren’t you?”

El answered this time, walking back into the dinning room. “Yes,” she smiled, “the car is all packed, we just need to pick the kids up.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to come?” Mike added, logging into his laptop. “The whole gang is coming. Even Hopper and Joyce.”

Karen pursed her lips in thought for a moment but then shook her head. “No I’m fine thank you darling. I have book club at 11 and you know how long that can go on for.”

Mike nodded, feeling slightly sorry for his mom. She was stuck in the same routines and always had been. She wasn’t exactly spontaneous. He didn’t want to put her on the spot though so concentrated on opening up Skype while El talked to Karen about the kids.

“Ah Holly’s already online,” Mike commented, distracting Karen who practically cooed with happiness.

“I wonder if she’ll have Sophie with her,” she said happily, referring to Holly’s 4 year old daughter.

“Let’s find out,” Mike said with a smile as he started to call Holly. She answered quickly, sitting at her desk in her study, waving at the group with her mini me on her knee. Sophie was like a carbon copy of little Holly, with her blonde hair, pigtails and bright eyes.

“Hello my darlings!” Karen waved enthusiastically.

“Hi you two!” El added.

Mike followed up with “Hey Hol! Hey Sophie!”

“Hi guys,” Holly grinned, whispering to a shy Sophie who waved, one hand playing with a pig tail.

“How are you both?” Karen practically shouted, leading Mike to explain that she didn’t have to scream, they could hear her fine.

“We’re good thanks mom,” Holly smiled. “How are you all? You look good mom. Is that a new dress?”

“Oh this old thing,” Karen laughed, waving her hand nonchalantly. “Where’s my lovely son in law?”

Holly smiled, “Chris is at Walmart, but he shouldn’t be too long. I didn’t give him a big list this time. How are you Mike? El?”

“We’re good,” Mike smiled. “We’re going to the lake today with the party which should be good.”

“Oh yeah!” Holly said, as Sophie pointed at the screen and smiled. “Max and Lucas are up right?”

“Yep,” El grinned. “And Ryan and Zach too.”

“Aw,” Holly smiled. “That will be nice for Ivy to see her boyfriend. It must be hard being long distance.”

El snorted and Mike immediately blushed. He quickly interjected, “they aren’t dating Hol.”

“They’re *not* ?!” Holly and Karen said in unison both looking at Mike who seemed blindsided.

“I mean, it’s probably not going to be long before they *are* dating,” El added, her hands on her husband’s shoulders, calming him.

Mike knew that he didn’t have a problem with Ivy and Ryan dating.

Ryan had proved himself not even just over the past week but all his life that he would be a loving and loyal partner to Ivy. What shocked Mike was how everyone could have seen their chemistry before he had. Was he really that blind?

“Yes” El’s voice seemed to answer inside Mike’s mind.

He was happily distracted when he saw Nancy was finally online and he was able to add her into the video call.

“Hi everyone!” Nancy waved, Jonathan in the background also greeting the group. “Sorry we’re late, I had to finish off my article. I’ve got a strict deadline on this one.”

“Oh that’s okay honey,” Karen smiled, taking a seat beside Mike, El sitting on her husband’s other side.

Once all the greetings were done and Chris had returned, Sophie jumping off her mommy’s knee and running into her daddy’s arms, the official meeting of Karen’s 70th birthday began.

“So mom,” Nancy started, pulling out her pad of paper and pen. “Are you still wanting a black tie event?”

“Yes I think so darling,” Karen smiled, “I’ve already started looking at dresses.”

“Me too,” Holly and El admitted, excitement in their voices at being able to dress up.

“And you want a live band,” Mike reminded his mom who nodded her head as Nancy wrote this down. “Have you had any ideas who you would want?”

“Yes I have actually,” Karen began, pulling out a leaflet from a folder she had created. “You know Mary from Willow Street? Well she had this band called Roses for *her* 70th birthday and I really liked them. I thought they could play a mix of songs from my generation and a few that you kids like.”

“Sounds good mom,” Holly smiled in agreement.

“That’s fine,” Nancy nodded, making a few notes. “Can you ask their availability mom? And then we can compile a list of songs to play.”

“I will do honey,” Karen said before adding with a slightly shy smile. “I also wanted to ask for something.”

“Go for it,” Mike answered. This was her 70th birthday after all and he knew how much it meant to her that they wanted to make it perfect for her.

“Well seeing as we’ve got some lovely talent in our own family, I thought a few of the girls could sing at the party. Just one or two of my favourite songs. Ivy and Emily have *beautiful* voices. Oh and Chloe Harrington! She was wonderful in the school musical.”

“I can’t speak for Chloe, but I’m sure Ivy would be happy to,” El smiled, making a mental note to ask her daughter.

Nancy nodded, “and I am sure Emily would do it mom. She does a lot of musical theatre in school so it’s not like she is stepping out of her comfort zone.”

“I don’t know who she gets it off,” Jonathan could be heard in the background, making the others laugh.

“We should be seeing Chloe today at the lake, so we can ask her,” El added after a moment’s thought.

“Lovely!” Karen said happily, a smile on her face as she turned a page in her folder.

“We haven’t discussed the most important thing yet!” Mike suddenly gasped, making El laugh.

“I wonder what they could be...” she teased.

“The food and specifically the cake,” he answered to the eye rolls of his sisters.

“Well I am going to have a meeting with the hotel about their buffet menu and canapes,” Karen said consulting her diary. She looked up at her son and smiled, “you’re more than welcome to join me

Michael. I believe there will be some samples to try - “

“Yeah I’ll be there,” Mike answered before his mother had even finished her sentence.

“Well I’m going to the cake tasting then,” El added, grinning at her husband mischievously.

Karen laughed, “that’s fine sweetie. I think I’m going with Mama’s Bakery.”

“Ooh good choice,” El grinned, nodding her head with enthusiasm.

“We’ve had some ideas about decorations mom, but if you don’t mind we want to keep it a surprise.” Nancy said before adding, “but it’ll obviously be in your chosen colour scheme.”

“I trust you,” Karen smiled. “I was thinking black, gold and silver as the theme.”

“Very classy,” Holly added, the rest of the group nodding in agreement.

The group carried on discussing the party such as the guest list, the invitations and transport. After a couple of shouts of “Ted! Ted! TED !” from Karen, Ted Wheeler awoke from his slumber and came over to say hello to his son and daughters.

Once the video call meeting was over, Karen hurried to the kitchen to get Mike and El a piece of warm apple pie. Even though they had breakfast a couple of hours earlier, neither of them were about to refuse some home baked goods and happily tucked into the pie, feeling like children again.

You couldn’t go into the Wheeler without being mothered by Karen Wheeler. It was like you left your dad and mom label at the door and became teenagers again. Not that Mike was complaining, he supposed he was a bit of a mommy’s boy and would happily get fed with mouthwatering baked treats.

Before Mike and El left Karen hurried over with a large bag, “I’ve packed the kids some cookies, they’re in the tupperware. Oh and the

rest of the pie and some chocolate muffins if you fancy one.”

“Thank you mom,” Mike smiled, taking the bag off Karen and kissing her on the cheek in gratitude.

“Thanks Karen,” El said, hugging her mother in law. “I can’t promise all the cookies will make it to the kids, but we’ll try our best.”

“Speak for yourself,” Mike grinned, winking at El.

They waved to Ted who was heading back to his chair and left the house. Holding hands as they walked to the car.

“Are you ready for some more madness?” El asked her husband, a wide smile on her face.

“Oh yes,” Mike laughed, feeling excitement building up inside of him. The rest of the day was going to be spent at the lake with some of his favourite people, what was there not to love?!

Chloe lay on her bed, her fingers brushing against the softness of her comforter as she listened to her music, her eyes closed. She had an array of emotive songs soothing her through her headphones. Break up and sad songs seeming to be the theme of the day.

She wanted to disappear, wanted the bed to swallow her whole as her thoughts traitorously took her back two days. She remembered walking up the stairs, wanting to drop her bag off in her bedroom before rejoining the others in the backyard for a barbecue. She heard voices but didn’t think anything of it until she came towards her bedroom door.

At first she was confused why James, Sam and Zach were in her bedroom, but then the memory seemed to twist into a nightmare. Everything had such clarity, like James holding her journal, *her journal* full of her deepest secrets and her desperate love for him. The year book was like the cherry on top of the cake. The page where James had written a message, where Chloe had sat in bed and drawn small hearts around his words was there for all the world to see, like a blazing beacon. She didn’t think she had ever been so humiliated in

her life.

Heat rose to the surface of her cheeks even with the memory. She would never live it down. How could she even look Sam, Zach and most of all *James* in the eye again? The worst was that she didn't understand *why* they had done it. Did they want to make fun of her? Make her feel like a stupid little girl? Humiliate her? Well it had worked.

Even when Ivy had come in to comfort Chloe she too couldn't explain why the boys had done it. Why they had invaded her privacy and made her feel this way. All Ivy could say was that they were stupid boys, but that she truly didn't think they *meant* to hurt her, whatever it was they were up to. To Chloe it seemed almost clear, like there was only one answer. They thought she was a joke, and they wanted ammunition for their fire.

Sam had texted her apologising and saying he hoped she would let them explain, but she hadn't responded. What was there to explain? They were sneaking around her room and had found their jackpot.

James trying to apologise swam around Chloe's mind so much it made her dizzy and disorientated. But what could he really say to make it better? He had never treated her nicely. He had never let her play with him growing up, unless of course she was there to be piggy in the middle, or put in goal while the boys played soccer, laughing when the ball hit her on the head or she missed it. And she always put up with it because she liked him.

She had seen another side of James that no one else had seen. Chloe couldn't explain it, but perhaps it was because of how much she had watched him over the years. She saw how he didn't love attention, how in school the girls would smile at him and he would bat it away. How smart he was, but he never bragged about it. How athletic he was, how watching him run track was mesmerising, the way he just *ran*. Like nothing could stop him. The way he could actually be a really good brother, especially to Ben. And the way Chloe had seen him be a good friend to Sam and Zach.

And while Chloe had observed all of this, he had observed *nothing* about her. He didn't have time for her, so why did she have so much

time for him?

Chloe was so consumed in her thoughts she didn't hear her phone ding with a message from Ivy.

Hey Chlo. How are you? Are you coming to the lake today? I know you probably don't want to come, but me, Lily and Grace will be there and we'll make sure you have a great time. Don't worry about any stupid boys.

She also didn't hear her dad knock gently at her bedroom door or his soft, "you okay sweetie?"

With no response from Chloe, a concerned Steve opened her door slightly, poking his head around the solid wood frame to find his daughter laying on the bed very much in her own world. He smiled sympathetically at her and opened the door wider, moving into the room and nudging her foot with his own.

Chloe opened her eyes, jumping slightly at the sudden touch. She sat up, feeling fuzzy headed as she pulled down her head phones, not meeting her dad's worried gaze.

"What's wrong baby?" Steve asked, his voice calm and gentle. He was a very relaxed parent, so was Robin, her strict parenting role only coming out when Tyler tested the boundaries. Chloe had always found it easy to speak to her parents, but this was just too embarrassing.

"I'm fine," Chloe mumbled, reaching for her ipod and turning it off.

Steve stared at her for a moment, his brow lowered as he observed her messy hair, her puffy eyes and her pale face. "No I don't think so," he sighed, sitting on the edge of her bed.

"You haven't been *fine* since we got back from the community pool the other day. You have barely eaten and you seem to have barricaded yourself in your room."

Chloe hesitantly lifted her eyes until she looked at her dad. "It's too embarrassing daddy, I can't."

Steve sighed patiently, after a moment his lips curved into a soft smile. “You know there’s nothing too embarrassing that you can’t tell me. You only know *half* of the embarrassing stories I have from being your age *and* older.”

“Really?” Chloe couldn’t help but ask, her heart feeling tight.

“Yep,” Steve laughed, getting a bit more comfortable on the bed. “Let’s see,” he said deep in thought. “Ah! So there was the time I thought working in the Scoops Ahoy in the old mall would impress girls. And maybe it would have worked if I wasn’t wearing the lamest sailor outfit.”

Chloe couldn’t help but laugh, having seen an old photo of her dad in said uniform with Uncle Dustin standing proudly beside him. She could imagine his chat up lines weren’t as convincing in that attire.

“Well at least that’s where I met your mom,” Steve grinned, his eyes glazed over for a second as they filled with memories. He laughed a moment later and turned back to Chloe. “And all throughout high school and the years that followed, I used Farrah Fawcett hairspray to achieve the ultimate hair style.”

Chloe sniggered, “who is Farrah Fawcett?”

Steve closed his eyes and shook his head, “that was a low blow.”

“Sorry,” Chloe smiled, willing her dad to continue.

“I did all sorts of embarrassing things! You know Jonathan Byers?”

“Yeah.”

“Well I tried to fight him in front of my friends, I was an idiot back then. And let’s just say he beat my ass.”

Chloe gasped, “why did you try and fight him?!”

“It’s a long story. But let’s just say I have a lot to be embarrassed about. So I can assure you that I won’t judge you for whatever it is that you think you can’t tell me. Because you can tell me anything and you have *nothing* to be ashamed about.”

Chloe hesitated, was this really something she could share with her dad? He was right, he had never judged her before. He had even taken her to Justin Bieber concerts which she was quite sure he had hated. But he would never say it. He still danced with her, still sang the songs and bought the merchandise.

“Something happened when we got back from the pool,” Chloe said in one breath, heat rising in her at the thought of reliving the event.

“Oh?” Steve asked, trying to pretend he wasn’t worried

Chloe closed her eyes for a minute, trying to summon the courage just to get the words out. *Just do it quickly, like taking off a bandaid.*

“When we came home, I found James, Sam and Zach in my bedroom. They were...I don’t really know. Sneaking around I guess? When I found them they were...um, they were holding my journal and my yearbook was open on an... *embarrassing page.*”

Chloe looked down at her hands, wringing them together slightly in nerves while Steve took in what she had said.

“Right,” he said, sounding both confused and relieved at the same time. “So had they read your journal?”

Chloe sighed, looking up at her dad. “I don’t know. I mean, if they didn’t, they were about to! And the yearbook page...” she covered her face in her hands. “That’s embarrassing *enough.*”

“I’m sure it wasn’t *that embarrassing,*” Steve said with reproach while Chloe laughed bitterly, reaching for her yearbook which was still under her pillow. With a quick exhale of bravery she flicked to the page in question and showed her dad.

Steve looked at the message, squinting slightly as he read who it was off and then noticed the red hearts drawn all around it. He smiled cautiously and quickly went back to a serious expression at the look in his daughter’s face.

“Okay,” he said with a slow exhale, processing what he believed to be the problem. “So James, Sam and Zach found this yearbook and saw this page, and now they know how you feel. And you feel - “

“Humiliated.”

“Humiliated yes. And they were also in your room so you feel like they were invading your privacy. Do you think they were looking specifically for this?”

“I don’t know,” Chloe answered honestly, her face still filled with pain. “I just know that James knows how I feel now, and he already thinks I’m a joke and now it’s just *worse*. At least I could pretend I didn’t care what he thought and now he *knows* that’s not the case. He’s laughing at me, they all are!”

Steve frowned, “is that what happened after you caught them?”

Chloe opened her mouth and shut it again. “Well... *no*. It was a bit of a blur, I know they did try to apologise but I was too embarrassed dad. I didn’t want to hear their lame excuses.”

“That’s understandable,” Steve reasoned. “But they also didn’t laugh at you baby. So I don’t think they intentionally meant to find that yearbook or your journal.”

Chloe went quiet, folding her arms and feeling defensive. Maybe telling her dad was the wrong idea. He just seemed to be on the boy’s side.

“Look I’m *not* defending them,” Steve said as if answering her thoughts. “But I remember being that age. Boys can be stupid, we definitely don’t mature as quickly as girls do. We’re still kids for a long time. I have known those boys all their lives and I don’t think they would intentionally hurt you baby. Do I think them snooping around your room and making you feel uncomfortable and embarrassed in your own home is good? Absolutely not. They do need to apologise properly and explain what they were even doing in here. But I just want to remind you that we *all* make mistakes. I made a *lot* of mistakes when I was a teenager. Some I am ashamed of.” Steve sighed, before reaching for Chloe’s hand. She hesitated before letting him give it a gentle squeeze. “They will grow up baby, it just takes time.”

“What do I do in the meantime?” Chloe asked, her voice practically

pleading for advice.

Steve smiled, his face lighting up. “Now that’s an easy answer! You just be your amazing self. You’re a Harrington after all! No matter how many times we fall, we get back up.”

“It’s not that easy,” Chloe sighed, smiling slightly despite her deep feelings.

“I know,” Steve agreed. “But there is more to life than boys. Don’t focus on them, focus on being *happy*. If I could make you happy I would do it in a heartbeat. But you need to make yourself happy before you should even be worrying about anyone else. And don’t worry about what those boys think of you! Focus on what makes you *truly* happy baby and the rest will follow.”

Chloe paused for a moment, taking it all in. It was very overwhelming and she couldn’t pretend that her dad’s words weren’t powerful or made sense, because they did. She raised her shoulders and exhaled a deep breath, trying to rid herself of the shame she had been feeling.

“Thanks daddy,” she smiled to Steve’s delight. “You are really good at advice.”

Her dad grinned, getting off the bed and stretching his arms. “Well I *have* been giving advice to preteens since I was in high school,” he teased. “Honestly you think you have had it bad! The stuff I had to help Dustin with!”

Chloe laughed, cringing slightly at the thought of Uncle Dustin needing dating advice.

Steve walked towards the bedroom door and turned to look at his daughter. “Just promise me you’ll try and have fun today?”

Chloe hesitated, mulling over in her head not just everything her dad had said, but the prospect of seeing the boys at the lake. Would it be awkward? Probably. But could she try and have fun? And try to remember that her happiness was more important than some stupid boys? Definitely.

“I promise daddy.”

“Good,” Steve said with a relieved smile. He was about to leave but he paused once more, looking back at his daughter. “And I wouldn’t worry too much about what the future might hold for you and James Wheeler.”

“Oh?” Chloe asked, raising her eyebrow.

Steve smiled slightly, shrugging his shoulders. “I see some electricity there.”

He didn’t elaborate, just left the bedroom, leaving Chloe confused by his wording. She shook her head and just accepted that while her dad was great, he was also a *dad*. And dad’s were weird.

Ivy sat at the kitchen island, her feet moving back and forth as she leaned against the cold counter top texting away to Lisa.

Lisa: So you’re telling me you were both in the pool half naked and you didn’t try anything?!

Ivy smirked, shaking her head before typing out a response.

Ivy: Our whole family was there Lisa!

Lisa: I’m not a fan of this slow burn Miss Wheeler!

Ivy: Me neither. We’re going to the lake today though, so maybe something can happen then?

Lisa: Just kiss him! You know he’s dying to kiss you.

Ivy felt her cheeks blush and she was grateful Ben and James were upstairs. They were waiting for their parents to get back from grandma and grandpa Wheeler’s house before they headed to the lake.

Ivy: Something has to happen today. I can’t take this any longer.

Lisa: Ask him on a date or something.

Ivy bit her lip as an array of butterflies fluttered in her stomach. Asking Ryan on a date sounded so definite. There would be no hiding the gesture as anything else if he didn't feel the same way.

But I think he does feel the same way, her thoughts bravely whispered. Ivy sighed, becoming distracted as there was movement on the stairs. Eggo came down first, panting as she headed towards the french doors, whining slightly to be let out. Ivy reached out her hand and unlocked the door with her mind. The handle turned itself and Eggo nudged it, happily running into the garden.

"I was about to let her out," James's moody voice came as he trudged towards the fridge. Ivy grimaced watching him for a moment, he was still in his boxers and shirt.

"Well don't you look ready for the lake," she said sarcastically, looking down at her phone to quickly respond to Lisa.

Ivy: I'll let you know how it all goes!

James turned to look at Ivy, a soda can in his hand. "That's because I'm not going." He cracked the can open with his powers and took a sip, moving back towards the stairs.

Ivy frowned, noticing for the first time how tired he looked. "Is this because of Chloe?"

James froze, gulping down the soda in his mouth and wiping at his lips. "No," he said weakly.

Ivy rolled her eyes, "that was the most pathetic *no* I have ever heard. This is the perfect opportunity to apologise to her, so you need to go."

James laughed turning to his sister, "I already *tried* to apologise to her Ivy. She didn't want to know what I had to say and told me to leave."

Ivy sighed, "James," she said seriously. "That moment for her was awful okay? The emotions of it all would have been very overwhelming. She's had a few days now to process everything, so this could be the time where she *will* listen to you. Just be honest

with her.”

James hesitated, looking down at his soda can. “I don’t know...”

Ivy couldn’t believe what she was about to say. “Listen James. I know we fight a lot, but I *know* that deep down you’re a really good person and that you made a mistake. You’ve got an opportunity to fix that mistake. You don’t just owe it to Chloe but you owe it to yourself. You’ve been a *mess* since then. Surely it will make you feel better to just say your peace?”

James was quiet for a moment, if it was from Ivy’s words or the fact that she complimented him, she wasn’t sure. He eventually nodded.

“Okay...I’ll...I’ll come to the lake.”

Ivy smiled, feeling relieved that she had managed to get through to him. “Good,” she said, pleased with his response. “Now go and have a shower because you stink.”

“Love you too,” James mumbled before going back up the stairs, leaving Ivy grinning to herself as she quickly grabbed her phone, sending a text message to Chloe to make sure she was coming.

An hour later when Chloe responded saying she would be there, Ivy practically cheered, hopeful that her brother could resolve the stupid situation he had gotten himself into.

This was followed by the sound of a car crunching the gravel as it pulled up in front of the house. “Mom and dad are here!” Ivy shouted up the stairs to her brothers. She grabbed her bag, lifting it onto her shoulder and smiled.

If James could be brave and talk to Chloe, Ivy could be brave and talk to Ryan. She was determined. She was not leaving the lake without a date.

James rested his head against the glass window in the back of the volvo as the Wheeler family drove to the lake. The road was slightly bumpy but he didn’t mind when it vibrated the glass, it almost helped release some of the tension James could feel building up

inside of him.

The car was filled with voices. His dad moaning about his lobster legs, his mom telling him to put more cream on them, Ivy telling Ben that she was going to try windsurfing and Ben responding that he wanted to go in a canoe.

James couldn't think of anything over than the bubbling nerves in his stomach at the prospect of talking to Chloe. Why wasn't it just easy to say sorry? It was a lot more complicated than that. Yes he wanted to apologise but he wanted to tell Chloe *why* they were searching in her room. If he outright said they thought she was *Bieblove*, would she either be confused and tell him off for searching her room when she wasn't even the mysterious gamer. Or *was* she the mysterious gamer and would she be so embarrassed that she was caught out, that they just went back to step 1?

James wanted to scream with frustration. Since the moment Chloe had caught them, James hadn't felt right. He was off his food, he couldn't sleep properly. He kept thinking about her and he didn't know *why*. He thought it might be guilt.

Sam and Zach had felt pretty bad too, but they seemed to have taken the approach that Chloe would forgive them eventually. They hadn't taken it to heart as much as James seemed to have done, which was another thing he couldn't explain.

Was it because of the way she had shouted at him? The emotion in her face? Or the fact that she liked him? Or at least *had* liked him. James frowned; that was another thing he didn't know how to bring up with Chloe. Did he mention the yearbook? Did he tell her she didn't need to feel embarrassed by putting hearts around his message? That it was okay? *Was it okay?*

James rubbed at his temple, wishing that these complicated thoughts would just leave him alone. He just wanted clarity.

"Here we are!" El called with excitement, driving slowly down to the small parking lot beside the lake. "Ah good, it's not too busy."

"Looks like the party is already here," Mike said with a smile,

squinting down at the lake where he could see Dustin and Lucas carrying between them a large cooler.

“All of them?” Ivy and James said in unison, both as apprehensive as the other.

Mike nodded, turning in his seat to smile at his kids, “yeah looks that way.”

James was so filled with nerves he thought he might be sick. He gulped, desperate for some fresh air. Ivy was impatiently waiting for El to pull up, her eyes trying to find Ryan.

El parked next to the Sinclair’s and sighed happily, pleased that it was a beautiful day and the vast water in front of them was sparkling blue under the sun. She turned to Mike with a slight smile, “are you going to allow me to coat you in sunscreen today?”

Mike laughed feebly, “absolutely.”

“That sounds disgusting coming from you two,” Ivy commented, her nose scrunched in disgust as she opened the car door.

“Agreed,” James muttered, not needing any more sickness to be added to his nausea.

“Gross,” Ben sighed, secretly just wanting to look cool to his siblings as he shuffled himself towards the open car door and got out, leaving their parents alone.

Mike and El looked at each other in dismay for a moment before bursting out laughing.

“Our children are so lovely,” El exclaimed gratefully while Mike sniggered. He leaned in and kissed his wife. Their lips lingered for a moment, their hearts falling into a peaceful lull.

As they slowly pulled out of the kiss, Mike sighed happily, his arm reaching around El, his fingers playing with her curly hair. “Don’t think I haven’t forgotten the proposal of chucking the kids out for the night and having some alone time.”

El grinned, leaning into Mike's touch. "Oh I know," she said wisely before her eyes flickered to Mike's legs. "But we might need to get those sorted out first."

Mike groaned and looked down at his sunburnt legs. "I promise I'll try everything, I'll even bathe in milk!"

El laughed, undoing her seat belt and getting out of the car. "You work on that honey and I'm all yours," she said with a wink, making Mike grin as he made a mental note to Google all types of remedies for sunburn.

James, Ivy and El helped Mike get the bags out of the trunk. There were lunch boxes filled with sandwiches, bags of chips and of course the home made goods from Karen.

Ivy sniffed like a bloodhound, her eyebrows raising. "What's that I smell?!"

El laughed, "perhaps grandma Wheeler gave us some treats. You can all have some if you're good."

"Ooh I bet it's cookies," Ivy sighed happily to Ben as she was handed a couple of bags from El.

"Well keep out of trouble and you'll find out," Mike teased as he gave James a few of the deck chairs.

"Yeah it's cookies," Ivy whispered to herself, sniffing one of the bags she was handed. "I can smell chocolate a mile off."

Mike put a backpack on and grabbed the last chairs, closing the trunk and turning to his family. "Right let's go," he said happily, leading the way. Ben, El and Ivy followed with excitement, James looked more like he was being led to his death.

He could see Chloe, she was talking to someone in the boat house with Grace and Lily. James wondered what she was doing until the man pointed to a canoe and the girls handed over some cash to him.

As the Wheelers got closer to the group and Chloe was walking back with the twins, the three of them holding the boat up impressively,

she finally caught James's gaze. She looked at him for a moment and James felt his heart suddenly beat. It was probably only a few seconds, but it did something to him. He couldn't explain it, but when she looked away he wished she hadn't.

Mike was right, the whole party was already there. The Byers, the Sinclairs, the Harringtons, the Hendersons and the Hoppers.

"Hey grandad!" Ben shouted to Hopper who turned from where he had been talking to Lucas, a beer can in his hand.

"Hey bud!" Hopper called back, his face lighting up at seeing his grandchildren. He turned to El who waved over at him, he smiled at her before his eyes were completely distracted by Mike's legs.

"Please tell me those are red leggings Wheeler. You couldn't have been *that* stupid?"

Mike sighed, slightly out of breath as he dropped off the chairs and stuff he had been holding by the empty fire pit.

"Afraid not Hop. I didn't listen to your daughter and this is what happened."

Max and Lucas were sniggering, Dustin shouted, "they're worse than the other day!" And Will just tried not to laugh thinking that Mike could do with at least *one* sympathetic friend.

"Try some aloe vera Mike," Laura said from her deck chair. "Drink plenty of water so you don't get dehydrated. And you should probably stay under the parasol."

"Thank you Dr Henderson," Mike responded, genuinely grateful. "In fact if you know any other remedies will you let me know?!" He tried to pretend he didn't see the way El smirked at him.

"Have you got the sandwiches?" Dustin asked, appearing by El's side, trying to peak his nose into one of the bags.

"Yes," El laughed, hitting him with the bag. "But let me just unpack first okay?"

Dustin tried to nod patiently and took a seat next to his wife.

Once James had put the chairs down, he went over to Sam and Zach who were both taking soda cans out of the cooler.

"Have you guys spoken to Chloe?" he asked them immediately, turning to look over his shoulder at where Steve and Robin were helping the girls get the canoe into the water.

"Sort of," Sam said, standing back up with his cold can. "We apologised as soon as she got here. We told her we were trying to find evidence that she was a mystery gamer."

James couldn't help his curiosity, "and what did she say to that?"

"Well she kind of just looked confused," Zach admitted, Sam nodding in agreement. "But I mean she could have just been playing us and just didn't want to admit it."

James sighed, "well we definitely won't find the answer lurking in her room. I think we've learnt that lesson."

"Definitely," Sam and Zach said together, looking equally as guilty.

James looked over at Chloe again. She was climbing into the boat, a life jacket on her petite frame as she laughed with the twins.

"And that was it?" he asked the boys while still staring at Chloe. "Did she forgive you?"

Sam shrugged, "she just said okay. I've known her a long time, I'm sure she will forgive us eventually. But the awkward bit is at least out of the way now."

"Not for me," James whispered, his heart beat only seemed to get louder as he watched her. She was moving away from the shore now, getting further away. Without even meaning to, James found himself saying "let's get a canoe."

Ivy had walked down with her family to the group feeling confident. She was getting that date no matter what. Her eyes scoured the party

for Ryan and she frowned for a moment, confused where he was. She expanded her search, her hand above her eyes as she tried to see through the sun rays.

Ah there he was, swimming. Looking like a god. Ivy admired him for a moment before clenching her fists in determination and setting off towards the water, before forgetting she still had her dress on. She huffed at the inconvenience and headed back to camp, taking off her dress and revealing her swimsuit. She had just gone for a red one today. Maybe Ryan would think she was Baywatch vibes or something. *Shame I don't have the boobs from Baywatch!*

"Right," she whispered, steering herself towards the water again.
"Take two."

It wasn't until she was quite close to the water's edge that Ryan spotted her. "Well hello there!" he shouted, before floating on his back.

"Hey!" Ivy called back, suddenly feeling nervous.

"You coming in?" he asked her, moving into an upright position in the water. His strong arms keeping him afloat.

"Of course," Ivy laughed just as her feet entered the water. She practically shrieked, "It's freezing!"

Ryan laughed, his eyes filled with mirth as he watched Ivy, her arms wrapping around her body. "It's not *that* bad! I promise you that you'll get used to it. Where the sun is on the water it's warmer."

"Are you lying to me?" Ivy shouted to him as she stared at the lake.

Ryan rolled his eyes and started swimming towards her. "I'd never lie to you idiot, now get in."

Ivy hesitated, before taking a few more steps into the water. "No, can't do it," she said, shaking her head.

Ryan laughed, his lips pursed for a moment in thought before he smiled. "I've got an idea."

Ivy looked at him suspiciously as he swam the rest of the way until he was able to stand. He got out of the water, Ivy's cold body suddenly flushed with heat at the way the water droplets ran down his skin. Her mouth was suddenly dry and she blinked, trying to concentrate.

"Take my hand and we'll run in together," Ryan concluded, holding out his hand to Ivy.

She laughed looking at it, "I don't think so!"

Ryan sighed, "I thought you might say that. So I have come up with an alternative solution." A mischievous grin captured his lips and Ivy knew what he was planning.

"No, no!" she squealed as she tried to get away from him, but it was too late. Ryan scooped Ivy up and ran into the water. She screamed as they practically dived under the surface. Her whole body drenched.

Ivy gasped as she rose to the top, spluttering while Ryan laughed beside her. " *You are an absolute -* "

"Genius?" Ryan offered as Ivy splashed him in the face.

Ivy had more choice words but she couldn't stop herself from smiling, her cheeks warming up as her body remembered the feeling of being swept up into Ryan's arms, her body against his. How could she be mad at that?

She stretched her arms out and sighed looking at him, smiling despite her initial annoyance. "You were right, it's pretty warm under the sun."

Ryan grinned, "see? You just need to trust me more."

Ivy took a heavy breath, her heart hammering in her chest as she looked at the man she loved. "You're right, I do. In fact I...I was wondering - "

"Hey guys!" the twins and Chloe waved from the canoe as they passed.

“Hi,” Ivy called back, putting a fake smile on her face, annoyed at the interruption.

“That looks fun,” Ryan shouted to the girls who looked back at him.

“It is!” Lily said as they circled back to the couple. “I think the boys are getting a canoe as well.”

“Hey we should race!” Grace shouted, her face lit up in excitement.
“Boys vs girls!”

Ryan turned to Ivy, “you up for that?”

Ivy wanted to say no. She wanted to say ‘*well actually, I wanted to ask you on a date*’. But she could see the boyish eagerness in Ryan’s eyes and relented. “Yes let’s do it.”

“Hey guys!” Ryan called to James, Zach and Sam who were carrying their canoe to the water edge. “Fancy a race? Girls vs boys?”

“Yeah!” called Zach and Sam. James didn’t answer, his gaze went to the girls canoe where they were helping Ivy in.

“We don’t have enough life jackets,” James stated, shrugging his shoulders. “Sorry man.”

Ryan laughed, “that’s cool, I’ll go and ask them for two more.”

James opened and closed his mouth, watching the oldest Sinclair child head off to the boathouse.

“What’s wrong dude?” Zach asked James, his brow frowned in confusion. “It sounds like fun!”

“Yeah well...will Chloe find it *fun* ?”

Sam smiled patiently at James. “She doesn’t *hate* us. She’ll be fine! Hell they’ll probably win anyway, they are freakishly strong.”

Ryan came back down from the boathouse, a life jacket on his torso with a spare in his hand for Ivy and two extra paddles.

James sighed, “looks like we are doing this then.”

Ivy had just been pulled into the girls boat, laughing as she fell in butt first. “Help me up!” she giggled to the twins who both held out a hand to her.

“Thanks,” she smiled sitting up properly. Ivy turned to Chloe who was sitting at the back of the canoe. “How are you doing?”

“Good,” Chloe said with a small smile. “I mean...I wouldn’t say I’m *completely* comfortable with the guys right now. Especially James. But I had a good talk with my dad and he made me see the bigger picture.”

“Really?” Ivy asked in slight awe. She couldn’t imagine talking to her dad about boys, especially not with how protective he had been over Ryan. And that was just when they were *friends*. Ivy felt like they were a lot more than friends now, and she hoped the signals that Ryan gave her meant that he felt the same way. She reminded herself to ask him on a date, no matter what distractions took place that day.

“Yeah really,” Chloe laughed. “Dad is pretty easy to talk to and he just told *me* to be happy, and not to worry about what other people think. And *I* think a race sounds fun, so I’m up for it.”

“That’s the spirit Chloe!” Grace called from the front of the boat, turning back to smile at the girls.

“We’re going to kick their asses,” Lily said confidently.

The water splashed as the boys canoe came into close contact, Ryan at the back, then James, Sam and Zach.

“Took you long enough!” Ivy teased, specifically at Ryan.

He laughed, passing her a life jacket and a paddle. “Well we are worth waiting for.”

Ivy felt her cheeks blush as she took the equipment off Ryan, his words radiating through her. She was thankful to be distracted with putting her life jacket on, securing the belts and positioning her

paddle.

“Okay where are we going from?” Lily asked, looking around for a good start line.

“Well why don’t we just turn now, so this is our starting point and our finish line can be that red buoy,” Ryan offered, pointing out to the bobbing red marker in the water.

“Sounds good to me,” Chloe said, more upbeat than Ivy expected. She chanced a glance at her brother and wasn’t surprised to find him looking confused. She supposed James expected Chloe to be quiet. Maybe he had always known her to be that way, but Ivy knew that wasn’t the *real* Chloe. She was shy around James, but now it looked like she was trying to change. She wasn’t going to let him affect her behaviour any longer. Ivy smiled to herself, proud of the young teenager.

The two canoes were steered in the right direction and they tried to keep them as still as possible, which wasn’t the easiest task.

“Alright are we ready?” Ryan asked, not wanting them to linger given the current.

“Yes,” the girls and boys answered.

“Ready, set, go!” Ryan shouted as everyone started to move their paddles. They yelled and screamed as they moved forward, the water thrashing as it was hit constantly, both teams wanting to win.

“We’ve got this!” Zach shouted as the boys took a small lead.

“No way!” Ivy called back, her eyes narrowed in concentration, her jaw tight as she paddled as hard as she could. “Come on girls! We can do this!”

The girls shouted in unison, going into overtime as they took the lead. “Don’t look at them!” Ivy yelled, competitiveness taking over. “Just focus on the finish line!”

They gave it everything they had and screamed in victory when they reached the red marker first. The boys came in shortly after, huffing

and panting for breath.

“Oh my god my arms are killing me!” Chloe laughed, putting down her paddle and massaging her skin.

“I think I coughed out a lung,” Lily said, crouching down as she tried to catch her breath. Grace joined her, beads of sweat on her forehead.

“But we did it!” Ivy said in a hoarse voice, her chest rising and falling dramatically as she looked over at the boys canoe. They were in a similar situation, Ryan was holding his side like he had a stitch but he managed to smile at Ivy.

“Well done girls,” he told her through pants.

“Thanks,” the girls responded through heavy breaths.

“Race back?” Sam asked feebly, making them all laugh through their exertion.

“Okay this is harder than I imagined,” Ivy gasped as she fell off her board for the second time. While some of the party were still on the shore eating sandwiches, cookies and chips, Ivy had joined the Sinclair’s as they rented sailboards for windsurfing. Living in California and being an active water sports family, they were already good at it, and even though they had assured Ivy it was light wind today so she would be okay, she still couldn’t get the hang of it.

“You’re doing a great job!” Ryan encouraged as he circled around her, not just afloat, but moving the rig like a champion.

“No I give up,” Ivy shook her head as she fell off once again, moving her wet hair out of her face.

Ryan smiled kindly at her and looked over at the shore, “just give me a minute to get rid of this and then I’ll come and help you.”

“You don’t have to,” Ivy sighed, paddling with her feet for a moment as she basked in the sun, the water sparkling around her.

Ryan stared at her, captured by the image. She was like an angel. He blinked and smiled to hide his embarrassment. “I want to help.”

Ivy didn’t have to wait long before Ryan was back, trying to tell her where to plant her feet, how to jibe and tack. She knew she was hopeless but tried her best, staying on a little longer, trying to find her balance and really control the sailboard and use the wind to her advantage.

“I’m doing it!” Ivy gasped with excitement fifteen minutes later, awkwardly turning in a circle around Ryan.

“Yeah you are,” he said with a proud grin, watching her closely, his heart racing at the way her body moved, the way her face lit up in amazement at what she was doing and her beautiful laugh that seemed to electrify every cell in Ryan’s body. He was so distracted he almost didn’t see her lose her balance when there was a gust of wind, she flailed her arms and fell backwards, Ryan practically catching her as she landed right in front of him. He closed his eyes to try and avoid the splash, but still spluttered slightly from the impact.

“Sorry!” Ivy laughed, turning in the water to make sure Ryan was okay. He shook his short hair, suddenly feeling her hands on his shoulders. He imagined it was to anchor herself, but it sent his heart racing all over again.

They were in such close proximity, he could see the beautiful cluster of freckles over the bridge of her nose and onto the top of her cheekbones. They were gorgeous and he just wanted to count each one.

Ryan realized he was staring at Ivy’s face, but when he looked into her dazzling eyes it was to find she was gazing just as intently at him. The moment suddenly seemed so filled with intensity. It was like they were the only two people in the entire lake, all distant noises of splashing, screaming and chatter just died down. It was just the two of them.

“Ryan,” Ivy suddenly said, her voice soft and nervous. She took a shaky breath, “do you - “

“Kids! We’re starting a fire! Do you want smores?!” Dustin shouted, bringing Ryan and Ivy completely out of their daze. They immediately pulled apart from one another, their cheeks going red as they started to swim towards the shore, both too shook up to speak.

As they started to walk out of the water Ivy tried catching her breath, wanting to kick Dustin and wanting to just grab Ryan’s hand and take him away. But the moment they reached the group, El asked Ivy to gather the sticks for marshmallows out of their bag and Ryan was sent to gather some wood.

Ivy frowned watching him go with the boys, her heart still in her throat. *Damnit! I AM GETTING THAT DATE!*

While Ryan, Zach and Sam headed right to gather chunks of wood and sticks for the fire, James wandered off by himself, going in the opposite direction. He wanted some peace and quiet, feeling very overwhelmed by the day.

He didn’t know what he had expected exactly from Chloe but it wasn’t *this*. Yes she didn’t seem like she was open to talking to him, but she *was* talking. In fact she was acting like nothing had happened. Like he wasn’t even important enough to bother her. Well it bothered James and he felt frustrated that he didn’t know why.

James moved around a few boulders that separated another section of beach. He froze seeing Chloe stood there picking up some thin logs from the edge of the trees. She heard his footsteps and turned to look at him over her shoulder. She seemed surprised by his presence and quickly looked away, picking up a few more logs and then turning.

He wondered if she was going to talk to him but then realised she had only faced him so she could walk back to the group. James could feel his heart beating as she started to move past him, completely blanking him.

“Wait!” he said weakly, cursing his voice for failing at this pivotal moment. Chloe stopped for a moment, but then moved again. James tried to clear his throat and tried again. “Chloe *please* just let me apologise.”

She finally turned to look at him, her face distant as she put down the logs and crossed her arms. “Go on then,” she said, her voice more icy than James had ever heard it. It made him nervous.

This was the moment he was waiting for so why was he finding it so difficult to speak? All he knew was that he *hated* the way Chloe was looking at him. He never wanted her to look at him like that.

She doesn't deserve silence. Just say it!

James took a deep, shaky breath. “I’m really sorry for hurting you Chloe. I never intended to hurt you, I *promise*. And you know how important promises are in my family,” he said with a slight beseeching smile at the end. Chloe didn’t smile but equally she didn’t walk away.

James tried again, “we shouldn’t have gone in your bedroom. That was wrong, I know that. And I knew it at the time. I know the guys have explained *why* we were there, and I just want to assure you it wasn’t to find your journal or...your yearbook.”

Chloe flinched at the word *yearbook* and so James hastened to carry on before he lost her. “I feel really bad about it. I’m really ashamed that we hurt you. That... *I* hurt you. I am hoping we can move past this, that you will accept our apology and that maybe we can be friends again.”

Chloe looked at James, the bitterness slowly melted from her face. But it was not replaced with happiness, if anything, she looked sad.

“But that’s the thing,” she mumbled, looking down. “Were we ever even *friends* ?”

The sentence hurt James more than he wanted to admit, but he tried to continue nonetheless. “I...um, I like to think we were friends.”

“Do you even know anything about me James?” Chloe asked, smiling sadly, her eyes looking pained.

“You love Justin Bieber,” James piped up hopefully.

Chloe rolled her eyes, shaking her head. “Everyone knows that.” She

started to pick up her logs and James watched her, feeling frustrated.

“I don’t know what you want me to do,” he admitted, feeling a sense of irritation building up inside of him. “I apologise, I say I want to be friends and you’re just being...”

“Being what?” Chloe asked, standing up with her logs tucked against her arms. She gave him a defiant look, wanting him to finish his sentence.

“Cold.”

Chloe smiled slightly, a bitterness back in her look. She turned to leave, taking a few steps before turning back to look at James. “If it’s forgiveness that you want, then fine. I forgive you, Sam and Zach for snooping in my bedroom. But that’s it. You don’t know me James, maybe one day you will.”

James was at a loss for words as he watched Chloe leave. He felt anger building up inside of him mixed with a horrible sickness in the pit of his stomach. It was as if he wanted to kick something, scream and cry all at the same time. He stormed over to the trees, kicking a rock which broke in half, his powers out of control. Adrenaline filled his veins and he gasped, collapsing onto the sand as he tried to catch his breath, his head in his hands.

James felt infuriated. He gave her a sincere apology, he said he wanted to be friends and she practically laughed in his face! *Why do I even care?!* James argued with himself. If he had been told a month ago that Chloe Harrington didn’t care about having James Wheeler in her life he probably would have cheered. No more silly rumours, no more kissing noises from his friends teasing him.

But today, sitting on the edge of a lake with only his feelings, he realised that Chloe Harrington wanting nothing to do with James Wheeler was the worst thing that could ever happen to him.

He walked back in a daze, confused that the fire was already going, that the party were already starting to eat smores and roast marshmallows, the sweet fragrance filling the evening air.

James took a seat next to Sam, practically collapsing into the chair. He didn't even look up from the flames, not wanting to see Chloe's face or meet his father's eye. He knew he was being watched.

He didn't know how much time had gone when he heard Max saying, "we should do some songs!"

"Yeah!" El and Jen cheered.

"Who is our lucky first victim?" Lucas laughed looking around the group.

"Oh honey, why don't you sing that *Pitch Perfect* song you like," Robin encouraged Chloe who immediately started shaking her head while most of the group cheered her on.

"I love that song!" Ivy exclaimed from where she sat in front of the fire with Ryan. "Hey Chlo I'll join in the chorus with you if you want?"

Chloe looked a little less shy at this prospect. "Okay," she grinned. "Mom did you bring your guitar?"

Robin laughed, "of course!" She jumped up from the log she had been sitting on and hurried to the car.

Robin returned to cheers as she lifted her guitar triumphantly. She settled back down on the log, and cleared her throat, looking at Chloe and giving her the nod.

The soft tune came beautifully out of the guitar, filling the starry night with a perfect partner.

"I got my ticket for the long way 'round, two bottles of whiskey for the way. And I sure would like some sweet company, and I'm leaving tomorrow, what do you say?"

James slowly lifted his head as Chloe's singing hit his ears. His heartbeat picked up as he watched her. She was sitting in a chair, leaning forward slightly as she sang, her head moving to the acoustic guitar as she stared into the flames, making her eyes look magical.

He suddenly felt captivated. He had heard her sing in musicals but it was nothing like this. This was raw. Just her and a guitar. Her voice was like warm rain on a summer's day, it showered over James, awakening his senses. And he looked at her, *really* looked at her. Her light brown hair as it flowed around her soft face, tickling her pale skin. Her full lips as she sang with passion, the way her green eyes closed as she really got into the music. She was powerful, talented and beautiful and James couldn't understand why he hadn't seen it before.

"When I'm gone! When I'm gone! You're gonna miss me when I'm gone. You're gonna miss me by my walk, you're gonna miss me by my talk, oh. You're gonna miss me when I'm gone."

James had clarity now.

Ryan couldn't help but nod his head to the music, his arms rested on his tucked up knees as Ivy sang along to the campfire songs beside him. He smiled watching her, her voice so mesmerising to him.

The fire flickered beautifully, lighting up their surroundings with a warm glow. The moon shone brightly ahead, making them feel protected underneath its pearly sheen.

"When the night has come, and the land is dark. And the moon is the only light we'll see," Ivy sang, her fingers tapping on her knees. "No I won't be afraid, oh I won't be afraid. Just as long as you stand, stand by me."

All of the adults, the twins and Chloe joined in for the chorus. Ryan smiled shyly and found himself singing as well. Ivy looked at him, her lips curved into a grin as they sang together.

"So darling, darling, stand by me, oh stand by me. Oh stand, stand by me, stand by me."

Ryan couldn't stop the emotion that fueled his body as he sang with Ivy, watching her sparkling eyes as she looked at him, his heart in his throat, his stomach filled with butterflies. No one made him feel the way she did. She was everything to him and being with her was the

best feeling Ryan had ever experienced. It felt like he just existed until the moment he had Ivy by his side, then *everything* made sense. Like two jigsaw pieces. She had always been his jigsaw piece, from the day they were born.

Without thinking, Ryan reached for Ivy's hand. She stopped singing, shocked by his action. The rest of the group didn't notice, they carried on chanting while the roaring fire gave the young couple some privacy.

Ivy's lips were pursed as if she was holding in a breath. Ryan felt like he was too and yet it was so simple. He only had to say the words he had been dying to say since he had returned to Hawkins. They came out easier than he thought.

"Will you go on a date with me?"

Ivy exhaled her shaky breath and did something Ryan wasn't expecting. She didn't kiss him, she didn't say yes, she just laughed. He winced, trying to retract his hand from hers. He *definitely* didn't expect this reaction and immediately reprimanded himself for being so open. *Well you've fucked this friendship up haven't you! Well done idiot!*

But to Ryan's surprise, Ivy tightened her grip on his hand and a wide smile lifted her cheeks. She giggled again and leaned in. "Well you sir just stole my thunder. I have been trying to ask you on a date *all day!*"

Ryan blinked trying to take in what Ivy had said and then found himself foolishly laughing too. "You're serious?!"

Ivy grinned, nodding her head. "Yes! And I kept getting interrupted."

Ryan couldn't stop himself from beaming with happiness, everything suddenly felt right in the world. He felt like he could run towards the lake and he would walk on water. He felt invincible.

"So is that yes then?" He asked, leaning in with a big grin on his face.

Ivy smiled, her teeth looking even whiter from the glow of the fire.

“Yes! It’s about time Mr Sinclair.”

He nodded, taking a deep breath, trying to exhale all the nerves that had built up inside of him. He smiled at Ivy, only one word coming to mind to say.

“Cool.”

Ivy grinned, her shoulders lowering as if she too had just relieved some tension. She looked at him, her lips in such a wide smile Ryan knew her cheeks would be aching soon.

“Cool,” she agreed, both of them turning to look at the flames, the music filling the air, the smell of the crackling fire in their nostrils, the joy of being around the people they loved as their hands tightly entwined together.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you so much for reading! Please leave a review if you can, it's my payment for spending all day writing haha

Take care everyone, until next time! 😊

7. There's A Storm Coming

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey guys! Chapter 7 is here! Thank you so much for being so patient 😊 At least it was only a two week wait rather than 6 months! 🙈 I really hope you enjoy this one, I really enjoyed writing it.

The Life We Deserve

Chapter 7: There's A Storm Coming

The birds chirped and rustled their feathers in the trees as the sound of laughter, shouting and the occasional shriek broke the silence of the humid summer's day.

"I told you I wasn't even playing!" Ivy gasped, having been pelted with Ben's water gun as he ran past, trying to duck behind her sun lounger.

"Sorry Ivy!" Ben whispered, his breath quite laboured from all the running he had been doing. "I'm trying to get away from - "

"Ah!" Ivy and Ben shrieked as they were both squirted with water, a deep laugh coming from their grandpa.

"Oh man I got you good," Hopper chuckled, not coming out from behind the tree he had been using as a hiding place.

Ivy huffed, grabbing her hair and twisting it, trying to encourage the water out of her dark locks.

"You should be thanking me," Hopper called over to his granddaughter while his youngest grandson tried to get him back, the retired chief managing to narrowly miss the water. "It's humid as hell out today."

"Yeah well I need to go and get ready soon and wet hair wasn't in my plan," Ivy sighed, gathering her book and headphones and tucking them into her rucksack.

"Why, where are you going?" Hopper asked, one eyebrow raised.

Ivy hesitated for a moment. Her mom and dad knew where she was going but she hadn't made it common knowledge outside of the household. Well except for Lisa of course who had done a happy dance when Ivy told her that she and Ryan were *finally* going on a date.

Deciding to be brave, Ivy turned to her grandpa hardly able to conceal her smile. "Ryan and I are going to the movies. On a date."

There was silence for a moment as if even the birds had held their breath. It was interrupted by Ben sniggering and taking the opportunity to squirt Hopper with the water gun. The old man jumped slightly, the stream of water hitting him on the forehead. He gruffly wiped it away, his eyes on Ivy.

"Aren't you a bit young to be dating?"

Ivy rolled her eyes, "I'm *seventeen* grandpa."

Hopper blinked and then his lined brow frowned in confusion. "I swear you were *seven* two weeks ago. Why did you have to grow up so fast, kid?"

Ivy smiled, trying not to give him a hard time. "I'm sorry grandpa, I didn't have much of a say in growing up. It just kind of happened."

"Tell me about it," Hopper muttered, wiping at his wrinkled arms. "It does sneak up on you kid. Well...you enjoy your date. And if Ryan doesn't act like a gentleman, you send him my way, okay?"

Ivy laughed softly, but nodded her head obediently. "I will do grandpa."

"Hey!" called Mike, who jumped up from behind some of the bushes. His water gun pointed at Hopper. "You're meant to be on my side!" He took aim but missed Hopper who darted back around the tree.

"As if I would be on your side!" Hopper shouted, completely camouflaged in the trees. Mike looked around cautiously, his gun at the ready.

"The stress you put me through with *my* teenage daughter!"

Mike blushed and it was enough of a distraction that he yelled, getting hit in the back by his father in law with the cold water. Ben suddenly jumped out as well and attacked Mike from the front. He was drenched from their shots and tried to duck, "El!" he called. "Help me!"

El appeared at the back door looking confused for a moment until she took in the scene in front of her. She shook her head in amusement and carefully stepped down the creaky wooden stairs and into the back yard.

"Are you bullying my husband dad?" she asked sternly, her eyes on Hopper who had lowered his gun.

"Just teaching him a lesson," the chief said, shrugging his shoulders like it was no big deal.

"I think I heard you loud and clear," Mike muttered, trying to rinse out his t-shirt. He yelped when Hopper quickly got him again, this time on the back of his head so his dark hair dripped down his neck.

El wasn't going to let this one slip and with one nod of her head, Hopper's water gun turned to face upwards and shot out the water all over the chief's face who spluttered in surprise. Ben, Ivy and Mike laughed, Hopper even had a chuckle once he had wiped the water out of his eyes.

"I have come to the conclusion that my family is crazy," Ivy sighed, putting on her rucksack.

"You've only just realised that now?" Hopper asked, walking out from the trees and into the back yard.

Ivy didn't reply, merely sighed before being distracted by her mom.

"Are you ready to go?" El asked, a glint of excitement in her hazel

eyes.

Ivy could feel an eagerness inside of her building up, desperate to get her date started. But she equally felt nerves that made her stomach queasy. God she hoped the date went well, it really did feel like a make or break situation. *So much good could come out of this date if it went well. Perhaps she would even be leaving not only with her best friend but her boyfriend? No pressure then!*

"I am yes," Ivy finally replied feeling slightly breathless. She had three hours before she would be picking up Ryan. And she needed to shower, choose an outfit, get dressed and do her hair and makeup. She could totally do this...she hoped!

"Well here's my key," El said brightly, handing over her car key. "Will you text me when you're safely at the movie theatre?"

"Of course" Ivy said, trying to be patient with her mom who was letting her borrow her car after all.

El hugged her daughter with a smile on her face. "Have fun sweetie and enjoy yourself."

"Thanks mom I will," Ivy said, unable to stop her own smile from curving onto her lips. She loved how happy her mom was for her, even her dad didn't have any objections when she had told them that she and Ryan were going on a date. Sure her dad had looked shell shocked for a moment but then he appeared to mellow back down. Things just seemed to have slotted so perfectly into place and Ivy wanted them to remain that way.

"Have fun Ivy," Mike smiled, his face such an evident picture of a dad trying to be cool and not worry when there were clearly a lot of cogs moving behind his eyes. But he was *trying* and that was all that mattered.

"But not *too* much fun!" Hopper shouted, making Ivy smirk and Mike to close his eyes, shaking his head.

Once Ivy had left, Mike took her sun lounger, trying to dry off in the

heat. He hated days like this when there was no breeze, it made it hard to breathe.

El was watering Hopper's plants with the help of Ben, and Hopper was going through his fishing equipment, making sure that they were all clean and up to standard before his next fishing trip.

"Do you want to come on my next fishing trip, bud?" Hopper asked Ben, who turned to look at his grandpa over his shoulder, a smile on his face as he overwatered one of Joyce's plants.

"Yeah!"

"Good," Hopper said with a smile, as he closed the bait tub. It was obvious that he was pleased his youngest grandson wanted to spend some time with him. His other grandson seemed to be MIA. Instinctively Hopper checked his watch and frowned.

"How long ago did James go for that walk?"

"About twenty minutes ago dad," El answered, her gaze turning to the woods for a moment. "Don't worry, if he's much longer I'll look for him."

"You know how large Mirkwood is honey," Hopper said to her kindly, as if he didn't want her going out there on her own.

El turned to look at her dad with a kind smile. "When I said *look* for him, I meant with this," she said tapping on her temple as Hopper understood her meaning.

"Ah I see," he said with a slight grin. "Do you check on the kids often with that method?"

El laughed, putting the empty watering can down. "No, only when I'm really worried. I try to respect their privacy otherwise."

Before Hopper could respond, the group turned towards the woods after hearing a twig snap. They waited until James appeared, his hands in his pockets and his eyes down as if he was in his own world until he felt the weight of three adults staring at him.

"You okay?" Mike asked him, unable to hide the concern from his voice. James looked tired, he had bags under his eyes and he seemed so withdrawn. Like a spark was missing from his eyes. It reminded Mike of something, but in the moment he couldn't put his finger on what.

"Yeah," James mumbled, not meeting any of the gazes upon him. He kicked some dried dirt with his shoe for a moment before saying, "I think someone was camping in Mirkwood. I saw an old sleeping bag and what looked like a fire pit."

"I don't know why anyone would want to camp there," Hopper muttered, his strong stare going onto the tall trees.

"Some parts of it are nice," El reasoned, pointing over to the opening in the trees where she and Mike had got married. The tree that they had carved *El + Mike 11/07/83* and then added their childrens names to.

"I agree," Mike nodded, but as his eyes turned onto the vast, heavy trees he frowned. "But I wouldn't want our kids camping there. The outskirts maybe, but not the centre."

It seemed that James had grown weary of the conversation and he headed into the house, not a word to his brother, parents or grandpa. They watched him go, perplexed at his behaviour.

"What's up with him?" Hopper asked, a deep set frown back on his face.

"I'm not sure," El sighed with concern watching the back door that her son had just gone through. "He's been like this for a few days now..."

"I think I should talk to him," Mike said, his gaze also on the house. "It just seems to be getting worse and I won't have him suffering in silence."

El smiled softly at her husband, her eyes tender with love as she watched him follow their oldest son. Mike may not think it, but he was a wonderful father. Neither of them were *perfect* parents, El

didn't think that role truly existed. But they loved their children more than anything and they wanted them to be happy and safe. And while Mike didn't always know what to say, his heart was always in the right place.

He found James in the living room watching cartoons. But could Mike really call it *watching* cartoons when his son's eyes looked glazed over, as if he was somewhere else completely.

Mike didn't say a word as he sat down next to James, taking a few minutes to watch the cartoon, hoping that his son would talk. But nothing.

"How are you?" Mike finally asked, his voice calm and his eyes still on the television. He felt James stiffen up next to him, his shoulders suddenly tight as if he was feigning attack.

"Fine," his son mumbled out in practically a breath, before going back to his daydreaming.

Mike frowned, wondering how else to approach the situation when his son was being so closed off. "You don't seem fine," he said bravely, his eyes hesitantly moving to James. The change of gaze didn't matter though because his son was resolutely staring elsewhere.

Mike continued, "you haven't seemed *fine* for a while. You know you can always talk to me. I might be your dad, but I've been your age and I've been through a lot of crazy stuff - "

"I'm going to Sam's," James said, standing up and heading towards the front door.

Mike opened his mouth and shut it. *Well that went well.*

"Do you need a ride?" he offered, turning to look at James who was stuffing his hoodie into a compartment of his rucksack before throwing it over his shoulder.

"No, I'll walk."

And with that James left, leaving Mike more confused than ever. He

stared at the spot where his son had just been, wondering how he could have approached that conversation differently.

"Did I hear the front door?" El's voice suddenly broke Mike out of his daze and he turned to look at his wife who had just poked her head around the door.

"He left," Mike said plainly, lifting his arms up in defeat before dropping them.

El frowned, her eyes going to the front door. "This isn't like him at all. He's never been this closed off with us."

"I know," Mike huffed, leaning back into the sofa and feeling suddenly exhausted. He rubbed at his eyes, covering them in his palms for a moment. "Man, he reminds me of myself at that age. I was so heartbroken over you and I didn't want to talk to *anyone*. Not my parents, not Nancy or even the guys..."

Mike's brain lit a spark and he wondered if just maybe James was having a similar problem. He slowly lowered his hands just as El joined him on the sofa.

She gave him a kind smile, reaching for his hand and entwining their fingers while Mike used his other arm to wrap around El's slim frame, pulling her closer to his chest.

"I'm sorry you had to go through that," El sighed, her cheek nuzzling against his still damp t-shirt.

"You went through it too," Mike said softly, pressing a kiss to his wife's forehead and closing his eyes for a moment, breathing her in. "I just can't believe I got so lucky to call you mine El. You're everything I wanted and so much more."

El smiled against Mike's chest, her heart happy and filled with contentment of the life they had built together. "And I can't believe I get to call you mine Mike. I never thought I could have a life like this." She looked up at her husband, their eyes meeting in the capturing moment that they had experienced since they first met. It was this intensity of *belonging*, of seeing everything you could ever

want or need staring right back at you.

"I love you," Mike whispered, his words only for her.

El smiled, her eyes bright and sparkling. "I love you Mike."

Their lips met in a gentle kiss, their mouths pressing and moving together as the emotion of the moment started to get away with them. It would have been easy to forget who they were or where they were, if it wasn't for Hopper walking in of course.

"Wheeler!" he shouted, making Mike and El jump apart like two teenagers caught in a bedroom.

But they weren't teenagers and despite the giggles that came out of them, Mike had a bit more sass now. He put his arm back around El and grinned at his father in law. "May we help you?"

Hopper glared at him for a moment, "I don't care how old you are, no funny business in *my* house."

"Sincerely sorry," Mike said dramatically, making El giggle and for the chief to mumble death threats under his breath as he walked towards the kitchen.

Ivy pulled up to her house in a rush of excitement, hurrying out of the car and almost forgetting to lock it as she clambered around trying to get out her house key. She knew the nerves would be back soon, but for the time being she was finally alone and could get ready for her date.

As Ivy opened the front door a distinct bark reminded her she wasn't *quite* alone.

"Hi Eggo," she smiled when the family's labrador rushed over to her, smothering her in kisses. She cringed trying to avoid the dog's tongue but patted her and gave her a quick smooch on the top of her head.

"This is it!" Ivy told Eggo who stared at her, panting away. "I'm going on a date with *Ryan!*"

The dog's reaction wasn't as excited as Ivy felt, but she decided to let it pass. "I'll let you out and then I'm going to get ready." Eggo obediently followed her sister to the french doors and took off into the garden, exploring and sniffing everything in sight.

It seemed quite simple; have a shower, get dressed, do her hair and make up. But it was so much more complicated than that. Ivy didn't think she had ever spent so much time in the shower in her life. They were only going to movies, but she couldn't help but pamper herself, finally getting out of the water with wet glossy hair, and smooth beautiful smelling skin.

Ivy stared at the outfits in her closet as if it were the final question on a game show, whatever she chose had to be the right answer. Again this wasn't a quick or simple task. It was hot outside, so should she wear a dress? But they were only going to the movies so should she try to be less formal? Ivy didn't want Ryan to think she wasn't making an effort. But what if she made *too* much of an effort? How embarrassed would she feel if Ryan rocked up super casual and she was there dressed up head to toe like a barbie doll?

Ivy huffed out a breath, annoyed at her own indecision. She grabbed a pair of jeans but as she started to pull them up her legs she changed her mind, it was too warm for jeans. She kicked them off and then pulled out a white summer dress with a pink floral design. Ivy put on the dress and twirled in front of her mirror, checking the different angles.

"This could work," she whispered to herself, feeling the material of the dress for a moment. She bit her lip wondering if it was too formal. Ivy looked over at her closet and pulled out a denim jacket.

With the denim jacket and white converse shoes, the dress looked a lot more casual and Ivy sighed a breath of relief, finally happy with her outfit.

Feeling a bit more confident, Ivy put her ipod in its dock, putting on a Taylor Swift playlist as she started to brush through her hair. She really got into the music, first tapping her foot to the country sound until she found herself singing into her hair brush when *You Belong With Me* came on, completely in the moment.

"Dreaming about the day when you wake up and find that what you're looking for has been here the whole time! If you could see that I'm the one who understands you, been here all along, so why can't you see? You belong with me! You belong with me."

Ivy's only audience was Eggo who sat in the doorway watching her sister with her head cocked to the side in confusion.

She continued singing as she styled her hair into a bun, pulling down wisps of her dark locks so that they shaped her face and didn't make her hairstyle look too neat. She was trying the look that screamed '*Oh I just chuck this together!*' but in reality it had taken ages.

Ivy sang along to Taylor Swift and Ed Sheeran's song *Everything Has Changed* as she put on her mascara and lip gloss, opting not to put any foundation on in case it melted off in the heat.

Her smart phone dinged and Ivy looked over at it as she screwed her mascara closed. Unsurprisingly it was Lisa.

Lisa: Have fun today gorgeous! What did you decide to wear?!

Ivy smiled, lifting her phone in front of her full length mirror and posing, taking a quick photo and sending it to Lisa before Ivy could scrutinise it and take 10 more shots.

Lisa: STUNNING! Totally beautiful! Ryan's going to have heart eyes . Have fun and make sure you tell me how it goes!

Ivy giggled reading the message, a grin stuck on her face as she typed a message back.

Ivy: I love you! Thank you :-) I will give you all the gossip later.

She put her phone down and picked a purse, putting her wallet, keys, phone and lip gloss inside. Ivy paused and grabbed a pack of gum as well, tucking it inside of the purse in case of emergency.

Now that she was ready to leave, Ivy felt the nerves building back up. She tried to swallow the lump in her throat as she stared at her reflection in the mirror.

"I can do this," she whispered to herself. "It's just me and Ryan, no parents or siblings to worry about."

Ivy slowly smiled, taking a deep breath as adrenaline started to rush through her veins. It was time.

Ryan huffed and grumbled as he went through his suitcase of outfits for the fourth time. When he had packed for Hawkins a date with Ivy hadn't been on his mind, so *nothing* looked suitable. He bit his lip in worry knowing that Ivy was going to look incredible and he would look so underdressed next to her. He didn't think he had ever cared so much about what he wore in his life.

When his mom knocked on the door to give him more clean laundry, Ryan didn't feel one ounce of embarrassment by asking for her help.

"Don't worry," Max laughed when her son stumbled over his words that he had nothing to wear. "There will be *something* suitable in all of this."

She pursed her lips in thought as she started to route through the options, pulling out a pair of shorts here and a t-shirt there.

"Now we want you to look smart," Max said as she singled out a short sleeved white shirt. Her hands then dug through the shorts. "But we also need to consider the heat out there."

Max hummed as she put a few of the shorts against the white shirt until she settled on a tan coloured pair. "Ah that looks nice," she said with an approving smile. "Smart but casual."

"Are you sure?" Ryan frowned, scrutinising the outfit, trying to find an imperfection with it.

Max laughed gently and looked at her oldest son with a grin, "yes I'm sure! I've been on a few dates in my life."

"Yeah but weren't those dates in the eighties when everyone dressed weird?"

"Hey!" Max said scandalised before laughing, shaking her head as she

looked back at the outfit. "The eighties fashion sense was certainly...*interesting*. You could even say *iconic*. But I promise you honey, this outfit works."

Ryan sighed in relief, a smile finally appearing on his lips as for the moment his nerves subsided. "Thanks mom," he said with gratitude.

"No problem," Max said as she got to her feet, the palm of her hand on Ryan's cheek for a moment as she gave him an affectionate smile. "I can't believe you two are going on a date! It's so exciting."

Ryan only blushed slightly as he grinned, unable to stop himself from feeling a rush of adrenaline soar through his body. "I know, I can't believe it either. I just hope it goes well."

"Oh I'm sure it will," Max answered with confidence, patting her son's cheek once more before moving towards the door. "Be your wonderful self and you will have nothing to worry about."

Ryan rolled his eyes and gave his mom an amused look. "I suppose I get that wonderful trait off you."

"Of course!" Max said in a twinkling voice, giving her son a wink before heading back downstairs.

Ryan stared at the outfit for a minute before taking a deep breath and grabbing a towel, "shower and get ready," he told himself as he headed towards the en-suite.

It felt like the shower had taken a long time, but the first official drama of the day was when Ryan hesitantly sniffed his dad's aftershave and decided to put some on, wanting Ivy to realise that he wasn't a *boy*, he was a *man*.

Well, that was until Ryan confidently walked downstairs, dressed and ready, and almost choked his family to death when they gasped he had used way too much aftershave. He ran back up the stairs to his brother's laughter and his mom saying "hey! Leave him alone, at least he doesn't smell like a dead animal."

Ryan only just heard Zach's affronted gasp and his father's laugh before he chucked off his clothes and jumped back into the shower,

cursing himself for his stupidity.

Once he was yet again dry, Ryan opted for just deodorant, sniffing his armpits and sighing with relief that he didn't stink and he also wasn't overpowering. He had barely calmed himself down or taken a deep breath when his dad shouted that Ivy was here.

Ryan's stomach immediately lurched with nerves, and as he walked towards the car it was with his heart in his throat. He could see her in the driver's seat, smiling at him and he suddenly felt faint with how beautiful she was. Just as he had known she would, Ivy looked incredible.

"Hey," Ryan practically croaked as he opened the passenger door and climbed into the seat.

"Hi," Ivy responded, sounding just as breathless.

He could feel the energy in the air, it was exciting and buzzing with electricity. They both looked at each other, nerves in their eyes but foolish grins on their lips that this was finally happening.

"You look beautiful," Ryan couldn't help but say, his heart racing madly as he looked at Ivy, his eyes flickering over her dress before he gazed back at her face, his stomach fluttering with butterflies when he noticed her pale cheeks had warmed slightly to a beautiful rose colour.

"Thank you," Ivy replied, her voice coy and alluring to Ryan. Her bright eyes moved over his outfit and he felt heat rising to the surface of his skin, having her full attention on him. "You look *really* great."

"Thanks," Ryan laughed bashfully, his hand reaching to the back of his neck nervously. "My mom *may* have helped me pick an outfit."

Ivy giggled, her sweet laughter making the butterflies in Ryan's stomach go wild. She put the car in drive and turned the steering wheel, setting them off on their journey.

"Well my mom didn't help me pick an outfit," Ivy replied with a smile on her face. "But you should *see* my room! The majority of my clothes are on the floor."

Ryan laughed, a permanent happy smile on his face as his eyes went from Ivy to the road and then back again. He had always worried that pursuing something romantic with his best friend would ruin their current relationship, but he had never accounted for how *comfortable* he would feel. Through the nerves and excitement, he could still be *himself*. He didn't have to pretend to be someone he wasn't, because Ivy had known him his whole life. The fact that he could still laugh, tease and be completely honest with the girl he was totally mad about, who just so happened to be his best friend was *magical*.

"Wanna listen to some music?" Ivy asked Ryan, glancing at him with a soft smile before turning her gaze back onto the road.

"Of course," he grinned, grabbing Ivy's ipod and plugging in the aux cable. "Anything in particular?"

Ivy hummed to herself for a moment as she tried to make a decision before she grinned, almost mischievously at Ryan. "You know what we haven't done for a while..."

Ryan groaned, "don't say Glee karaoke."

"Glee karaoke!"

Ryan shook his head as Ivy laughed wickedly. "You know I can't sing!"

"You *can* sing! Besides, there's no one else here. We both know you love Glee just as much as I do *and* I've heard you sing a million times."

Ryan hesitated, but when Ivy said, "*please?*" in the cutest way possible, he knew he couldn't resist. He huffed in defeat and pressed play, letting Glee's version of *Don't Stop Believin'* fill the car to Ivy's cheer.

"You know what to do," Ivy grinned at her best friend, her smile so playful Ryan couldn't help but laugh before he started to sing along with Cory Monteith. He shook his head in amusement as Ivy cheered him on.

"Just a small town girl, living in a lonely world. She took the midnight train going anywhere."

"Just a city boy, born and raised in South Detroit. He took the midnight train going anywhere!"

Ryan soon got into the song, watching Ivy going for it like she was in a performance made him amp up his own part. They laughed together, moved their shoulders together as they sang at full volume.

"Don't stop believin'! Hold on to that feeling! Streetlight, people, oh oh!"

Ivy was cheering as the song came to an end, thrilled with their performance while Ryan laughed, looking down at the ipod and feeling slightly out of breath as he saw that the next song to play was *Like a Virgin*. He quickly skipped it hoping Ivy wouldn't notice.

They only managed to get through two more songs before Ivy was pulling into the parking lot of the movie theatre. Posters stuck behind glass cases on the side of the building advertised the movie they would be seeing.

"Is it weird that we're going on a date and the movie we go and see is called *This is the End?*" Ryan admitted, before both he and Ivy laughed foolishly.

She grinned, shaking her head. "No, it sounds like a good movie! Seth Rogan, Jonah Hill, James Franco, *Emma Watson* to name a few!"

"It should be fun," Ryan agreed, his heart racing again as he looked at Ivy. "I mean I'm with you so..."

Ivy practically beamed, becoming bashful for a moment before she teased Ryan. "Wow. That was cheesy, even for you!"

Ryan laughed, taking off his seat belt. "Maybe I'm cheesy now."

"I'll start calling you the big cheese," Ivy joked, opening the driver's side door.

"Are you calling me fat?!"

Ivy gasped in feigned shock, "never!"

Ryan shook his head like he was disappointed in Ivy as she giggled, locking the car door and rushing over to his side with a big smile on her face. He couldn't even pretend to be upset with her, his lips twitched into a grin as they walked closely together, their fingers brushing against each other as they headed into the movie theatre.

Ryan was immediately hit with the smell of buttery popcorn as he opened the large glass door for Ivy, smiling to himself when she thanked him, moving past his body in such small proximity that he felt the goosebumps rise on his arms. He just wanted to grab her hand and pull her close, hold her in his arms and never let her go. She was intoxicating and he wanted nothing more than to breathe her in, to kiss those lips and move his fingers through that glossy black hair.

Instead he walked by her side until Ivy suggested he get the tickets and she get the snacks. Ryan agreed, although he hated being separated from her. It just felt *wrong*. But nevertheless he joined the queue and picked up the prepaid tickets.

Ryan headed towards the snack line which was going slower than the ticket queue. Ryan stayed to the side of the line of people and watched as Ivy moved to the front. She was just picking their drinks when the employee behind the counter said something to her that pricked Ryan's ears.

"Hey it's Ivy isn't it?"

Ivy seemed surprised by this and looked up at the man from where her eyes had been on the popcorn. It didn't appear she remembered the guy's name but with a rush of jealousy to Ryan's stomach, *he* remembered this jerk.

"It's Tristan," the blonde man said with a smile. "I saw you at the pool with your family."

"Oh!" Ivy said, the recollection now occurring to her. "Right. Tristan. How are you?"

"Good thank you, I'll be finishing my shift in a few minutes. Are you here alone?"

Ryan felt his blood boiling as he glared at Tristan. He *hated* how forward this guy was with Ivy. Who the hell did he think he was?

Ivy looked uncomfortable and handed over the cash for the popcorn and drinks. "No, I'm here with my...um, my friend."

Ryan felt his heart drop. Yes logically they weren't together...yet. But was he really just a *friend* to her? Why did she say yes to a date if she just wanted to be *friends*? He barely heard Ivy's call to help her with the popcorn and he only just made it out of his daze to help with the drinks before Tristan offered to help.

"No I got it," Ryan said sharply to the jerk, his eyes narrowed with hatred. Ivy looked surprised at Ryan's behaviour, her lips slightly parted as she followed him towards screen 2, completely confused by his suddenly cold exterior.

Ryan found their seats, his mind in a completely different place than the low lit theatre room. Their seats were on the aisle and Ryan directed Ivy in first, trying his hardest to not let his thoughts go to a place where jealousy took over him. He could honestly say he wasn't much of a *jealous* person, or so he had thought. But there was something about this whole situation and that stupid Tristan that put him on edge. He didn't trust the guy, at the pool he had practically ignored Ryan and in his opinion had been all over Ivy. Couldn't he see that there was something between them?

"No, I'm here with my...um, my friend."

The words echoed through Ryan's mind as he settled into his seat, handing Ivy her drink. His eyes turned to the dark screen as it started to play commercials that he pretended he was watching. He knew he was being distant, he could feel Ivy's eyes on him, but he couldn't help it. *Friend. Friend. Friend* swirled around his thoughts, taunting him. Could she really see him as anything other than a friend? Was this date a mistake?

"Hi again," came the last voice Ryan wanted to hear. He and Ivy

looked up to see Tristan holding a bag of popcorn and a drink as he shuffled past Ryan and took the spare seat next to Ivy.

He smiled as he settled down, chucking a piece of popcorn into his mouth. "I've just finished my shift. I usually go home but I haven't seen this one yet," he said, pointing to the screen before turning to Ivy and completely blanking Ryan once again.

"But I love an '*end of the world*' type movie."

Ivy smiled politely but didn't say anything, she instead grabbed her drink, practically draining it as she kept her eyes on the screen. Ryan didn't say anything either, his body practically seething, wanting to grab Tristan by the neck of his collar and pull him away from Ivy.

This wasn't the *date* Ryan had expected, and as he tried to watch the movie, he failed multiple times not to side glance at Ivy, Tristan sometimes catching his eye and smirking. He knew what he was doing.

Mike looked up at the sky with concern as El unlocked the front door of their home. The humidity was making way for a storm, the clouds were darker now and heavier than ever. Ben rushed inside the house, cuddling Eggo who excitedly jumped at him in greeting.

El turned back to look at her husband, a frown on her forehead. "Should we ring Dustin and say we'll pick up James?"

"Yeah," Mike said, slightly distracted as he tore his gaze from the sky and nodded at his wife in agreement. "I'll call him now."

They walked into the kitchen, Ben letting Eggo out before he grabbed a snack from the fridge and headed into the living room to watch Cartoon Network. El put her bag down on the cold kitchen island and watched patiently as Mike dialed Dustin's house phone.

It rang for three rings before Laura picked up. "Hello?"

"Hey Laura," Mike said with a smile as he too went to the fridge to grab a soda. "Can you let James know that we'll pick him up? We want him home before this storm hits."

Mike opened his can and took a sip as there was a pause on the phone before Laura spoke again, this time her voice a little worried.

"James hasn't been here today Mike."

Mike spluttered on his drink as Laura added, "is everything okay? Do you want me to ask Sam if he's seen him?"

"Y-Yes please," Mike said weakly, his heart beginning to race as he looked over at El. She watched him with wide eyes, having heard what was said on the phone.

There was a bit of muffled sound as Laura moved through her house and knocked on Sam's door. Mike heard her asking her son if he had seen James that day. He seemed confused when he said no, adding "should I have done?"

"Thanks Laura," Mike said abruptly, trying to swallow the lump in his throat. "We'll find him." He put the phone down and was about to start ringing James's smartphone when he stopped, seeing El was already attempting it. She paced the room, one hand to her ear clutching the phone and the other arm around her chest, like she was holding onto herself.

"Nothing," she said nervously as she put her phone on the counter and looked at Mike. "I'm worried now. You know what that means."

Mike nodded, trying his best not to let fear in. James was a free spirit, he could be in the arcade with Zach and just not heard his phone. Or he could have run out of battery. He was strong, he had powers after all so could protect himself. But that didn't stop Mike's heart from pounding as he watched El turn the television in the kitchen onto a static channel, her jaw tight with anxiety as she grabbed a clean tie out of the laundry room and sat at the island counter, tying the cloth around her eyes.

Mike sat beside her, his eyes watching her intently as she tried to concentrate, having not had to do this kind of search in a long time. She never had to hold onto anything when it concerned their children, they were a part of her, she carried them and would for the rest of her life.

The room was silent except for the static from the television and the spattering of thick rain drops that started to hit the french doors.

"I see him," she whispered tensely, making Mike sit up beside her, his shoulders rigid.

"Where is he?" he couldn't help but ask, his own voice slightly breathless.

El seemed confused, her eyebrows lowering. "He's just...sitting there."

"Where?"

"It...it looks like sycamore street."

Mike blinked, his brow creasing in confusion. "Isn't that Steve Harrington's street?"

"Yes," El responded, equally as baffled by the situation. "He is sitting on the sidewalk. It's raining." Her voice croaked as she continued, "honey, he looks so sad."

"Right," Mike said, having enough of the idea of his son this way. "I'm going to get him."

El pulled the tie from her eyes and turned to look at her husband. "I should come with you."

Mike smiled softly at El, brushed her cheek with his hand tenderly. "You stay here with Ben where I know you're both safe. I'll get James."

El hesitated but finally nodded her head against Mike's warm palm. "Be careful. Tell me when he's safe."

"I'm surprised you won't be watching," Mike laughed gently, pointing at the tie on the counter top. El smiled slightly, not denying this.

They both rose from the kitchen stools, Mike picking up his jacket and an umbrella. "He's going to be okay El," he told his worried wife. She was pacing again, her lower lip beneath her teeth.

"Just bring my baby home safely," she said with a sigh, moving over to Mike to kiss him.

He cuddled into her for a moment, and breathed her in. "I promise."

Mike narrowed his eyes as the windscreen wipers flashed back and forward trying to prevent the worst of the downpour from affecting his sight. He thought about what El had said and where she had found James.

What was he doing on sycamore street in a storm? And if he needed shelter why didn't he just knock on Steve's door? Mike couldn't understand it. *Why* was his son so withdrawn? *Why* was his son so sad? *Why* wouldn't his son confide in him?

Mike's eyes widened as he remembered the look in James's eyes that morning. The light that was gone, the sharp response, the attitude. It hit Mike like a ton of bricks as he remembered that same light being gone from his own eyes. His attitude, especially with his parents and his absolute refusal to talk to anyone about how he was feeling.

Mike almost laughed at how simple it truly was. James was in love.

His own breath caught as he realised how much pain his son was in. He was just as heartbroken as Mike had been, and he wouldn't wish that pain on *anyone*. Let alone his own son.

His hands gripped the steering wheel more firmly as he put his foot down on the accelerator, determined to get to his son. To help him.

As soon as Mike pulled into sycamore street he spotted James. He wasn't close to the Harrington house, so Mike supposed Steve wouldn't have noticed him out there in the storm. Especially now that visibility was poor. He was a hunched figure, sitting on the pavement, his knees to his chest and his face hidden by the hood of his sweatshirt.

Mike parked the volvo next to the sidewalk but James didn't look up. He hurried to undo his seatbelt and rushed out of the car and over to his son.

"James?" Mike said, his voice strong and caring like any father's

should be.

James slowly looked up, thunder rumbled over head, the sound of the rain bouncing around them being the only sound as they stared at each other for a moment. Mike was momentarily shocked by how pale his son looked. And were his eyes red?

Mike shook his head, clearing his mind and going into dad mode. "Come on bud, let's get you in the car," he said, offering his hand out to his son. James looked at it for a moment before his own shaky cold hand grasped onto his dad's. Mike lifted him, his arm going around his son's shoulders as he helped him into the passenger seat.

Mike closed the door and hurried back around the driver's side. He got in and reached into the back seat, gathering the things that El had insisted he take before leaving.

"We need to get you out of those wet clothes James," Mike muttered, worry etched in his voice as he handed James a towel and a fresh t-shirt and sweater.

James hesitantly pulled off his wet clothes, chucking them in the back as he put on the t-shirt and sweater and used the towel almost as a skirt as he pulled off his soaked jeans and took the dry sweatpants Mike handed him.

James didn't say a word as his dad started to drive. He wrapped the towel around himself like it was a blanket, shivering slightly. Mike frowned, glancing at his son for a moment. He came to the end of the road and when he should have indicated right, he indicated left.

"Let's go get some food and a hot drink," Mike said resolutely. He glanced at James again and for a moment he saw his little boy, so small and in need of the safety of his daddy's arms. He might be 13 years old now, but when Mike looked back at James, he *still* saw his little boy who needed his dad's help. If anyone could understand this situation, it was Mike. He took a deep breath as he turned again to his son. "We need to talk."

James watched through bleary eyes as his dad pulled into the

McDonald's parking lot, the lights of the large sign looked smeared and distorted through the view of the wipers and the soaked windscreen. The rain drops looked like glitter in front of James' eyes, picking up every bit of colour off the restaurant.

"What would you like?" Mike asked as he turned into the drive thru.
"I'm thinking an americano, quarter pounder with cheese and large fries."

"I'm not hungry," James croaked, his stomach traitorously growling in protest.

Mike snorted as he put the electric window down and stopped at the intercom. He placed his order and waited for James to add his. When there was silence Mike ordered for him. "Yeah can I also get a large hot chocolate, large fries and a big mac please."

James rolled his eyes, hating the fact that his dad knew him so well and ordered exactly what he would have done.

Once the brown bag and two hot drinks were handed to Mike, he gave them to James and found a space in the parking lot away from any other cars. It wasn't busy anyway, the storm had kept people away and it was past dinner time.

Mike handed out the food, putting the radio on low as he happily munched on his burger and fries. James just felt uncomfortable, not sure what angle his dad was playing here. He seemed *too* relaxed after James had lied to him about where he had gone *and* not answered his mom's calls.

James couldn't even quite comprehend how late it had gotten. When he left his grandpa's house he didn't have a plan but to just keep going. He had walked and walked, past the quarry, back through the trees, into town and then past maple street and before he knew it he was at sycamore street staring at the Harrington's house, praying Chloe would just come out so they could *talk*.

But their car wasn't there and so James waited. And waited and waited. Were they away or something?

James had tried to prepare what he would say to her. He wasn't going to apologise again. She had accepted his apology, that wasn't the problem. The *problem* was that she didn't seem to want anything to do with him and that killed James. It felt like he was at rock bottom and when he thought he couldn't fall anymore, the floor would open and he would continue to tumble down.

He couldn't *bear* the thought of not having Chloe in his life. He felt helpless and *nothing* without her. Yes they hadn't dated, but even not having her as a *friend*, even an *acquaintance* was incomprehensible. She has always been there and now she just wasn't. She couldn't just rip up his heart like that, it was *painful*.

He didn't remember crying until the tears were hitting his arms, soon merging with the rain that had started. But James didn't want to move, he felt numb.

The warm lights of his dad's volvo had brought him out of his coma as with emotional exhaustion he had accepted his hand and let him help. James sighed, looking down at his food. His dad was just trying to help again.

With slight hesitation James reached for a fry, then another. Before he knew it he was getting through his food, his senses starting to come back to the front of his mind. The smells of the crispy warm fries, the melted cheese on the beef burger and the soothing warmth of the hot chocolate revived his energy levels.

They were quiet for a while, both of them eating their meals and listening to the radio, soft 80's music playing softly. It was when they had finished and were sipping their hot drinks that Mike spoke up.

"This probably won't come as a surprise to you, but I grew up with a dad who only seemed to take an interest in me when I was achieving something. Track team, swim team or when my grades were good. Your nana Wheeler, she kind of covered everything else. Discipline, care, cooking, *love...*"

James didn't roll his eyes or tell his dad that he didn't want to hear this. For once he just listened.

"When your mom and I had you, Ivy and Ben I made a promise to myself that I would be a different dad than my father. That I would be active with you all, care for you all, tuck you up in bed, read you stories, play with you, help you with your homework and love you with everything in me and protect you to my last breath."

Mike's voice wavered for a moment and he paused, looking out of the windscreen and taking a deep breath. "I want you to know that just because you aren't a child anymore, that doesn't mean I'm not here for you James." He turned his gaze onto his son.

James could feel his eyes welling up and he looked down at his lap, trying to control the tension that was building up in his chest.

"I went through the worst trauma of my life at your age. I lost your mom. And even though I *knew* she wasn't dead, unlike Dustin, Will and Lucas, I was lost because I didn't have *her*. I couldn't speak to anyone and it destroyed me James. It was the greatest heartache of my life."

James slowly looked up at Mike, surprised by the tears in his dad's eyes. James felt his own fall down his cheeks at seeing his dad in this much pain. It triggered something within him. He *loved* his dad and he knew that he couldn't have asked for a better dad. He was everything a dad should be.

"I knew what had happened with the demogorgon," James said through a hoarse voice, his throat sore. "But I didn't know that was what it was like for you."

Mike smiled sadly and wiped his tears. "I couldn't sleep, I couldn't eat. Nothing felt *normal* without her. She was torn away from me in the cruellest way. I didn't feel like I could confide in anyone. I didn't think mom would understand, dad was a no go, Will was dealing with his own things and Dustin and Lucas really believed your mom was gone. It was terrible. I had the worst behaviour too."

"Really?" James asked nervously, knowing that he was displaying similar symptoms.

Mike laughed sadly, "just ask Max. I treated her *terribly*. I thought she

had taken your mom's place in our group and I *hated* it. I was bad in school too, I graffitied, I talked back to teachers. I know I was hard work."

Mike sipped his coffee for a moment, sniffling as he tried to control his own emotions. He put his cup down and turned to James, his wet eyes beseeching.

"I feel that if I had someone to talk to, someone who understood how I was feeling, then things might have been easier."

James knew what Mike was saying. He knew he wanted him to confide in his dad. Usually he would say no and just ask to go home, but as he looked at his father and saw the raw emotion in his face and thought about the personal things he had told James, he paused.

"It's about Chloe." James looked up at his dad, nerves in his eyes as he expected his dad to laugh or say 'that's it?!'. But when Mike did nothing but nod slightly, urging his son to keep going, James cleared his throat and carried on.

"All these years Chloe always seemed so...*annoying*. She was *always* around me, and the guys teased me constantly about her. In fact *everyone* in school did! They used to say that she was in love with me and she did nothing to dispel the rumours either. In fact she was always doing stuff that would make the situation more embarrassing! Like writing my name in her yearbook, or *Mrs Wheeler* in class so people saw it on her notepad and *apparently sang to me* during the school musicals!"

Mike made no reason to interrupt so James continued, his heart beginning to race.

"That's the way it's always been. But recently...I...I started to feel *differently*. She doesn't seem obsessed with me and because she's kept her distance I've...noticed her. I've seen her having fun with the girls and...and just being *herself*. And I like who she *really* is."

"That's good," Mike said softly.

James sighed, rubbing a hand over his tired face. "Well it might have

been good until..."

"Until?"

James winced as the memories of the last few days came rushing to the front of his mind. "It's complicated and a long story. But me, Zach and Sam searched Chloe's room the other day because we were trying to find clues that she was this secret gamer we've been playing against on xbox."

Mike opened his mouth but James cut him off, quickly continuing. "Yes I know it was wrong and a complete invasion of her privacy. What made it worse is that she caught us *and* thought we had read her journal."

"Oh wow," Mike breathed out, his face serious as he listened to his son.

"Yeah," James sighed, shaking his head and closing his eyes for a moment. "Needless to say she was pissed." Mike let him off with the curse word on this occasion.

"We all apologised to her at the lake and she accepted our apologies too. But..."

James stopped, gulping down the rest of his hot chocolate, his stomach in knots as Chloe's words swam around his mind taunting him.

He wiped his mouth and looked down at his lap, ashamed. "She doesn't want to be friends. She doesn't want *anything* to do with me." He squeezed his eyes closed, daring the tears not to flow but they did anyway, against his will.

His voice was shaking as he continued. "And that sucks because I really, *really* like her dad. I sometimes even think I might...I might *love* her."

James laughed tiredly, wiping at his eyes with his sleeve. "But what would I know. I've never *been* in love before."

Mike smiled gently, watching his son. "Trust me bud, when you

know, you *know*."

James was quiet as he sniffed, continuing to wipe his eyes as Mike sighed, turning completely to his son.

"All hope isn't lost James," Mike said kindly, his voice caring as his eyes flickered over his son's face. "She said you weren't friends?"

James nodded, hiccuping slightly as he hunched his shoulders and looked down at the floor.

"Have you ever *tried* to be her friend?"

James paused in his hiccuping and looked up at his dad, his mouth opened and then shut.

"If you think you're in love with her James, or even that you don't want to lose her out of your life, then don't give up." Mike said with a strength that James had always admired about him. It was the strength that James had observed in his dad as he grew up, it was a strength that said he would always be safe, he would always be protected and he would always be loved.

"I know your feelings for her are intense, *believe* me I understand. But why don't you start from the beginning? This is a clean slate. Put the effort in, let things flow naturally between you two. Take the time to see what she is *really* interested in and perhaps you will see a similar passion there."

"She plays guitar," James piped up, his eyes a bit more hopeful. "I always said I wanted to learn."

Mike nodded his head, "yeah you did." He hummed for a moment and then smiled as an idea came to his mind. "Well why don't I buy you a guitar? We can try online classes or I'm sure Dustin would give you some pointers. I think he taught Chloe if I remember right."

James could feel the tension in his chest lifting. Could there really be hope? Could this just be a lesson he had to learn and was allowed to move on from?

"You'd buy me a guitar?" James asked, his voice slightly croaky as he

stared at his dad.

Mike smiled, "of course! You've always wanted to learn *anyway*, and if it's an ice breaker with you and Chloe then that's just a bonus right?"

"Right," James repeated, taking a deep breath and feeling like the weight of the world came off his shoulders.

Mike noticed the change in James and smiled, putting his seat belt back on. "Let's get you home so you can take a shower bud, we don't want you to get a cold."

James would usually have responded with a roll of his eyes or a sarcastic comment, but instead he nodded, putting on his seat belt. Just as Mike put his hand on the steering wheel, James stopped him from driving, putting his own hand over his dad's to get his attention. Mike looked at his son in surprise.

"Thanks dad," James said, his voice trembling slightly. "You kept your promise, you know. You're a great father."

Water pooled into Mike's eyes and he blinked rapidly, trying to clear them as he coughed, his own emotion just as heightened as James'. He squeezed his son's hand for a moment. "I'm always here for you. I love you."

James smiled bashfully, taking his hand away so his dad could drive. Mike had just started moving when James whispered under his breath, "love you too dad."

Ivy stared at the movie screen desperate for the credits to come up so that the agony would be over. When she pictured her date with Ryan this was the *last* thing she could have imagined. They had barely spoken since Ivy had queued for the snacks and she wasn't stupid to not know why. It was clearly because of Tristan and that idea infuriated her.

Did Ryan really think she cared for this guy she had only met two times and barely said *two words* to? Of course not! So why was he

avoiding speaking to her, why was he treating her like she had done something wrong?

Ivy was just as uncomfortable with Tristan sitting next to her as Ryan was. This guy was trying to attach himself to her and she didn't appreciate it. She had been dreaming of this date for years! And while she blamed Tristan for ruining it, she also blamed Ryan for acting this way. She wanted to knock both guys' heads together and storm off.

Mercifully the movie ended and Ivy sighed in relief, pulling on her denim jacket and facing Ryan.

"Going so soon?" Tristan asked, watching her.

He irritated her and she turned to him, "yes I'm going now. Come on Ryan," Ivy responded, nudging her best friend with her foot so he hurried to his feet.

"Bye!" Tristan called as Ivy stomped down the stairs, barely raising her hand in acknowledgement, Ryan trying to catch up with her.

"Why are you walking so fast?" Ryan huffed, catching up to her just as they exited the movie theatre, the rain was bouncing around them, splashing onto the sidewalk.

Ivy spun around, almost hitting heads with her date. "Did it ever occur to you that maybe *I* didn't like sitting next to that guy?"

Ryan was surprised by her words and opened and closed his mouth like a fish for a moment, his eyes wide as he tried to find words.

"Because I didn't okay?" Ivy shot at him, her eyes narrowed. "But you treated me in there like I was *flirting* with him or something!"

Ryan closed his eyes and shook his head, "that's not it Ivy."

"Then what *is* it?" Ivy asked him, her hands on hips impatiently.

When Ryan once again didn't seem to be able to get his words out, Ivy rolled her eyes and turned back to the car. "Let's go. I want to go home."

Ryan trudged behind her as she led the way to her mom's car, practically seething with her best friend. Lisa would never believe this was how their date had gone. It was meant to be this monumental moment in their budding relationship and it had been *ruined*.

Ivy got into the drivers side and put her belt on, tapping the steering wheel impatiently as Ryan got in too. Once he was also buckled up, Ivy started the drive back to the Sinclair's, a horrible silence between them. It was so painful that Ryan turned Ivy's glee playlist back on, clearly needing a distraction.

When Glee's version of *Faithfully* started playing Ivy closed her eyes for a second, both she and Ryan knowing how much she loved this song. She listened to the words and how they had always reminded her of Ryan, especially when he was all the way in California and she wanted so desperately to just *be* with him. Her stomach twisted as she regretted shouting at him.

"Look," Ivy breathed out, her hands gripping the steering wheel as she stared out at the open road. "I'm sorry for being mean. I just...I don't understand why you were being so cold with me."

Ryan sighed, rubbing his face in his palms for a moment. "No, *I'm* sorry. I know you weren't flirting with him Ivy. I swear I didn't think that."

"Then what was it?" Ivy asked, calmer this time but still as intrigued to want to know why Ryan acted so out of character.

Ryan took a deep breath and turned his gaze on Ivy, she could only look at him briefly though as she made sure they got home safely in the storm.

"You told him I was your friend."

Ivy's breath caught in her throat as it all suddenly made sense. She remembered saying it too, but it was only because in the moment she was scared to say 'boyfriend' in case that was too much for Ryan. It was only their first date after all.

Ryan cleared his throat making Ivy feel suddenly nervous. "And the truth is," he said, his voice shaking, causing the butterflies in Ivy's stomach to listen in.

"I don't want to *just* be your friend Ivy."

Ivy could feel her heart pounding in her chest, her fingers clenching onto the steering wheel for dear life. Had she really heard that right? Had Ryan *really* said that?

She chanced a glance at him, and saw the look in his eyes. It was overwhelming and exhilarating and everything she felt in the moment. Ivy looked back at the road and laughed, her pulse in her ears.

"Why would you say this when I've still got to drive for like five minutes?!"

Ryan laughed nervously, Ivy soon joining in. Their heartbeats so loud they could practically hear the others.

"Sorry," Ryan smiled, making Ivy grin.

"You're not sorry."

"No I'm not," he laughed softly. "In fact, it felt amazing to get out."

Ivy felt excitement rush through her veins at the reality of what Ryan was saying. He wanted to *be* with her! She wanted to cry, scream, laugh and smile all in one, but instead she was stuck driving. *Three more minutes!*

Ivy took a deep breath and glanced at Ryan for a moment, a smile widening on her lips as she realised what she wanted to say to him. And yet she didn't feel nervous. After all he had not only broken the ice between them but lit it on fire.

"Does it make you feel even more amazing that I don't want to just be your friend either?"

Even though her eyes were on the road, Ivy could feel Ryan's smile, it was radiating off him and setting goosebumps up and down her body.

"Yeah," he coughed, "I'd say that makes me feel pretty damn amazing."

They both giggled, suddenly back to being bashful and coy. Ivy sighed the deepest breath of relief as she pulled into maple street.

"So this date was pretty rubbish up until this point," she admitted, parking up outside of the Sinclair house, no longer having to look out at the splattering rain but finally able to turn in her seat to look at Ryan.

He was staring back at her and smiled awkwardly, rubbing the back of his neck with his hand. "Yeah," he admitted with a cringe before his smile grew wider. "But I suppose that just means I get another chance to make this perfect. And I *will* get it right Miss Wheeler."

Ivy smiled so widely her cheeks ached, but she didn't care. She couldn't stop the pounding of her heart against her chest, the enormous flutters of butterflies in her stomach or the way she just wanted to sing and dance with happiness.

"I can't wait Mr Sinclair."

Ryan grinned at her, his beautiful chocolate brown eyes lit up more than the lightning in the sky. He was perfect and Ivy knew he had her heart in the palm of his hand. He had always had it, but now she hoped he knew.

Their intense gazing was distracted by a loud crack of thunder making them both jump, laughing nervously at their reactions.

"Well," Ryan sighed, smiling at Ivy. "I suppose I best go so that you can get home. Are you sure you will be okay?"

Ivy nodded her head patiently, trying not to go on a rant about how not only was she safe in the car but she had super powers if needed.

"Will you text me when you get home? So I know you're back safe?"

"Yes *mom*," Ivy teased, winking at Ryan who laughed.

"Are you really going to berate me for *caring*?" Ryan asked, smiling

softly at Ivy, making her heart leap into her throat.

"No," she admitted breathlessly, watching him hesitantly open the passenger door.

"I'll speak to you soon," Ryan told Ivy tenderly, his eyes still on her as he got out of the car, the rain immediately coating his shirt.

"Speak to you soon," Ivy agreed, her voice breathless as she watched him go.

"Bye," he said gently, his eyes still on her.

"Bye," Ivy replied, her chest feeling like she had just run a marathon. She watched him turn towards the house, blood rushing through her body, her heart beating so fast she thought she might pass out.

What are you waiting for?! A stronger version of Ivy's voice practically screamed in her head, courage now filling her body as she grabbed the door handle, wrenching it open and running out into the storm.

"Ryan!" Ivy shouted as she came around the side of the car. He had paused on the footpath up to the house, turning to her just as she ran towards him.

She could hardly read his lips as he tried to talk to her over the pelting rain, but it didn't matter. She knew what she wanted to do. What she had wanted to do since she was a little girl. There was no holding her back now. No annoying brothers, no distractions. This was the moment.

Ryan practically caught her as she launched herself at him, her arms around his wet neck as she leaned in and kissed him. He was in shock for a split second, frozen before he too melted. His arms wrapped around Ivy in an instance, practically sweeping her off her feet as they kissed.

Ivy felt like she saw a million fireworks before her eyes as they kissed, their lips touched in an immediate intensity, the feelings they had held back for years bursting to life in the most beautiful colours. They swayed on the spot, completely in the moment as they got drenched head to toe. Ivy didn't know how long they stayed there,

their lips pressing together, caressing one another, their hearts screaming with joy as they sunk into one another's touch. It was the most passionate moment of Ivy's life and she never wanted it to end. It was only another rumble of thunder that made them pull away, both breathless and dazed.

"Woah," Ryan gasped between deep inhales. He looked stunned, his eyes wider than ever, his lips slightly parted.

Ivy giggled, shaking with adrenaline. "So...I'll look forward to your call about this date."

Ryan looked too astonished to speak for a moment but he eventually blinked, taking in what Ivy had said and laughing with what sounded like relief. "Oh you just wait," he said, unable to hide the biggest grin Ivy had ever seen on his face. "It's going to be perfect this time."

"I know it will be," Ivy smiled, her heart feeling like it was never going to beat at a normal pace again.

She looked up at the sky and laughed, closing her eyes as the rain washed over her. She looked back at Ryan, smiling as she pushed her wet hair strands back. "I best get going. I will text you when I'm home."

"Good," Ryan said breathlessly, his gaze stuck on Ivy, his eyes adoring as he watched her go back to the car.

Ivy was just about to get into the car when a hand tugged her. She turned and Ryan was there, pulling her into their second kiss, his palms cupping her wet cheeks as their lips met again. It was intoxicating and Ivy didn't know how they were ever going to stop. Her arms went back around Ryan's neck as she pulled him closer, their lips moving against one another even more intimately this time, her mouth open slightly as Ryan's lips teased her own. She knew by the time she got home she wasn't just going to be a puddle from the rain, but from the way he just made her *melt*.

Eventually they parted when Max popped her head out of the front door and said El had called asking where Ivy was, worried about the storm. She wondered if Max had told her mom what the young

couple had been doing, but she didn't dwell on it, knowing her mom would only be happy for her.

Ivy didn't stop smiling all the way home, in fact she knew there was no way she was going to get this grin off her face for weeks. Her lips tingled from kissing Ryan, and she touched them with her fingers, the beautiful memories flashing through her mind at *finally* crossing the line. There was no way they were going back now. Now that they knew how amazing it was to be close, they couldn't step away from that. And there was no way Ivy could see that happening. They were stuck now. *Happily*.

Ivy practically waltzed into the house, soaked head to toe. Mike and James were still out, El was in the living room with Ben but at the sound of the door she came through to the entrance hall, her eyebrows lifting at her soaked daughter who was dancing around.

"Did you have fun sweetie?" El asked, her smile wide as she watched her very in love daughter before handing her a towel to dry off.

Ivy beamed, taking the towel and dancing around with it, her heart fluttering at the thought. "It was *magical*."

Ivy was showered and texting away with Ryan and Lisa, tucked up in bed when James and Mike finally came home. El greeted them, hugging her son the moment he came through the front door. He didn't dismiss her attention and instead hugged her back.

She held him for a moment, breathing in deeply and closed her eyes. All her babies were home now. El opened her eyes and gazed at her husband, capturing him in a loving smile, so incredibly grateful for everything that he did. Her heart was home. Safe and sound from the storm.

Notes for the Chapter:

Does anyone else feel like they've just been on a rollercoaster or is it just me?! I REALLY enjoyed

writing this chapter and found it very emotional too,
don't ask why because I probably can't answer 😊
Please let me know your thoughts! Lots of love to
you all! ❤️

Author's Note:

AN: So what did you guys think? I have got SO much more to come! I am currently writing Chapter 2 and really excited about this story. I hope you liked it too and that it's given you a small distraction in these crazy times. This chapter was really to introduce you to some of the new characters, but we've still got the Sinclair's to go ;-) Please leave a review if you can and a kudos if you liked the chapter, I would really appreciate it :-)

Sending my love to everyone. Let's hope that this lockdown is over with soon. We will get through it!
Thank you for reading xxx